



Producing Section (Comb) Honey¹

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The 1970's saw a renaissance of producing section (comb) honey. The eminent Russian beekeeper, Peter Prokopovitch, was the first to produce this kind of honey over 160 years ago. Section (comb) honey was popular and shipped regularly in railroad car lots in the early 1900's -- acknowledged leaders in the field at that time were Dr. C. C. Miller and G. F. Demuth. The Killion family in Illinois is one of the few remaining contemporary producers of this specialized product. Most recently, introduction of the plastic circular section has promoted renewed interest in comb honey.

Section (comb) honey is the purest product available from the bees. It's virtually untouched by human hands or man-made equipment. The honey remains in the comb until removed by the consumer. In this era of over-processed foods, it's one of the most "organic" treats available to consumers and demands a premium price.

Two types of section (comb) honey can be found -- circular and square. The square sections are usually made from the finest basswood, whereas the circular ones are constructed of plastic. The virtues of each type are well-known -- as well as their limitations. It's generally agreed that circular plastic sections are

easier to produce because the bees fill them more uniformly than the traditional square ones.

A lot of information exists on preparing wooden and plastic sections for the colony. Like with so many things in the art of beekeeping, however, recommended procedures to manage a colony for comb honey production are obscure or incomplete. Glancing at several different methods leads one to the "sneaking suspicion" that the bees will produce section (comb) honey no matter what system is used -- **if the conditions are right.**

Therefore, it's important to understand certain principles and to work out the details of management which will adhere to these. **MAXIM:** Strong colonies and vigorous honey flows are needed to produce section (comb) honey.

Although beekeepers can't control conditions to maximize honey flows, they can influence dramatically the strength of their colonies. It can't be emphasized too much -- hives should "*boil over*" with bees! In order to achieve this, some people use the two-queen system; others a single queen. Some run double-brood chambers; others insist that only singles are needed. Some dequeen colonies and give cells or young queens to prevent swarming; others stick with

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a queen-right system and try to prevent swarming by other means. Most beekeepers reduce double- and triple-brood chambers to singles and doubles, respectively. It's generally agreed that the bees must be crowded in order to "make" them go up into sections. They apparently don't like to work in sections and must be forced to do so.

Crowding, however, produces two management problems -- swarming and pollen storage in the sections. Both are undesirable, and so a balance must somehow be achieved in determining how much room to give a colony which is used for section (comb) honey. This is only acquired through experience.

Timing is extremely important in section (comb) honey production. Bees of field age are a must. That means the queen must be stimulated to lay a maximum number of eggs four to six weeks before the flow. Since the sections are worked from the rear toward the front, supers should be reversed every few days to promote uniform filling. Top supering is recommended by many, but some bottom super. Two supers are added by most at the beginning of the flow; additional ones are put on as each preceding super is one-half to two-thirds full. It's better to err on the side of adding too many at the start of the flow and too few during the latter half. Any error means incomplete sections -- a waste of bee and beekeeper time! Filled and capped sections must not be left on the colony after they are finished. They can become travel-trained and, therefore, unmarketable in a short period.

Finally, there is the matter of storing completed sections. Even in strong colonies wax moth eggs are always present. There is no fumigant now labelled which can be used for comb honey. The best alternative is freezing the sections to kill wax moth eggs. To reduce condensation, sections should be sealed in air tight plastic bags while being frozen and during thawing.

In summary, successful section (comb) honey is based on certain principles: 1.Strong colonies "boiling over" with field bees 2.Vigorous honey flows 3.Proper timing A.Stimulating the colony to maximum egg-laying 4 to 6 weeks before the honey flow B.Adding supers as earlier ones are 1/2 to 2/3

filled C.Removing filled supers as soon as they're completed 4.Giving enough room to reduce swarming and pollen storage yet forcing the bees into the sections 5.Proper handling of completed sections to prevent wax moth damage.

Sections (comb) honey production is considered to be one of the highest forms of the beekeeping art -- certainly in the same league with rearing quality queens. It, therefore, requires more work and attention to detail than other management techniques. The end product, though, is well worth the extra effort. The best advice is to start small and increase production as you gain experience.