



Gold Star Honeybees

HOW TO INSTALL A PACKAGE OF HONEYBEES INTO YOUR GOLD STAR TOP BAR HIVE

What do you want in the way of bees to go into your Gold Star Top Bar Hive?

In an ideal world, you would capture a large, healthy swarm. This is a colony of bees with a mated queen, who led approximately half of a thriving colony out of their home in search of a new beginning. These bees will be seriously motivated with a “hive mind” consensus, to build honeycomb—as a place for their queen to begin laying.



However, swarms are somewhat random events of nature, and you may or may not connect with one. So another method of obtaining bees, is to purchase a “package” of “loose” bees. Package bees can be purchased, along with a queen bee, from a honeybee supplier. You can locate suppliers on the internet, or through your local beekeeping group, or through your personal beekeeping mentor. Where this gets tricky is that to order bees, you need to plan far in advance—January or February is not too early to be shopping for bees, and possibly putting down a deposit. A swarm, on the other hand, is more of a “drop everything and go collect them” event —likely in May or June. Great if you can get ‘em. If not, you’ll want to have purchased a package in advance.



These bees will either need to be picked up at the your local supplier’s apiary, or they will arrive at your local post office - in a shoebox-sized screen-sided crate-like box. The post office will call you asking you to (hurry!) come and get them! You will need to install them into your top bar hive as soon as possible—best if no more than 24 hours after you have received them. They cannot live inside that package for long—they need to fly and to forage.

When you first bring them home, put them somewhere out of harm's way. Then -- get yourself prepared, before you open the bee package!

Here is what you need:

Some protective beekeeping equipment:

At Gold Star Honeybees, we prefer the jacket with the veil that zips on, since it's easy to get in and out of, obstructs less of our vision while we're working, and can be thrown in the washing machine on a regular basis, but there are other options, including full length bee suits, or helmet and veil combos with yards of rope to tie yourself into them. A pair of bee gloves is a very good idea too.

Your Gold Star Top Bar Hive - assembled and placed:

If you live where it snows a lot in the winter, a sunny location is best. If your locale gets into the 90's frequently in the summer, and rarely snows in the winter, you will want a location with dappled sunlight, even some shade. Set up your hive with its front entrances (the three holes) facing generally south. Be very sure that the hive is sitting quite level, as the bees will build their honeycomb "plumb" i.e. straight up from the center of the earth, so if the hive is not level, the comb will not lift out easily when you go to inspect it.

Sugar Syrup:

Make some 1:1 sugar syrup. 1:1 syrup means a syrup made from mixing water and granulated white cane sugar in a mixture that is one part sugar to one part water, by weight. This recipe is one of the reasons you often hear beekeepers repeating the phrase "A pint's a pound the world around." What that means is that a pint of water weighs one pound—so that if you take one pound of sugar, and one pint of water (which is two cups)—you have created 1:1 sugar syrup. In slightly more logical (or at least American-sounding) units, that means ten cups of water and a five pound bag of sugar. This is for spring "emergency" feeding. Bees that come to you in packages have got no resources to work with, and no comb to begin storing nectar in. Making wax takes carbohydrates—so they will need to be fed in order to get them started, or they are likely to starve. Boil ten cups of water, take it off the heat, wait a few minutes, then stir in five pounds of sugar until it's all dissolved. Voila! Bee "junk food"!

A spray bottle:

Put about a cup of your freshly made syrup in a clean spray bottle. Use this sugar syrup for spraying the bees during the installation. Use the rest as bee food in your feeder kit.

A feeder kit:

There are several methods of making sugar syrup feed available to your bees—Gold Star Honeybees sells a feeder system designed to fit securely into the Gold Star Top Bar Hive. If you've got one of these, it works like this: you place the feeder tray into the hive, fill the one-quart Mason jar with the syrup, screw on the lid with the small holes in it, then go outside to your hive, and upend the jar. Wait a few moments until it ceases to drip and then set it into the blocks in your feeder tray.



Now set up your hive for the install:

Put your feeder tray into one end of the hive, against the end panel. Put the syrup jar on it. Put ten top bars across the hive cavity above the feeder, and then the follower board that has the hole drilled in it. The bees will access the feeder through this hole in the follower board. Put ten top bars across the hive cavity on the other side, then the follower board that has no hole in it. So what you have now is an open space ten bars wide, surrounded by two follower boards.

It should look like this - kind of like a “bowl” for your bees!



You should have one of the front center entrance holes open—all of the other entrances on the hive should have corks in them.

Gather up some helpful stuff:

Get a screwdriver or putty knife for prying. Get several push pins for attaching the queen cage to a top bar. Have several on hand, since you will likely bend the first one. A sheetrock screw is often useful for removing the cork, if there is one, from the exit hole in the queen cage. So bring one of those, too. Another useful thing is a bottle of rubbing alcohol—we use this in case we get stung, since it does away with the alarm pheromone that is generated when a bee stings—that tells her sisters “sting here”! We just splash some on where the sting was and go about our business.

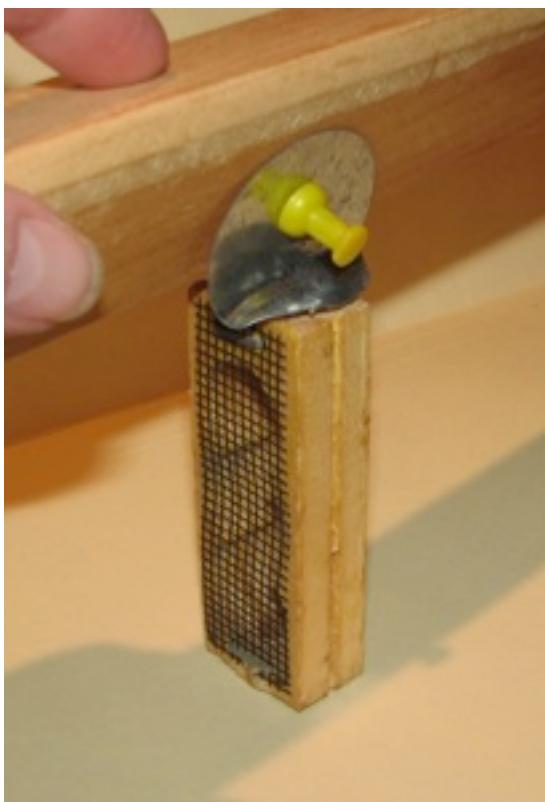
Get your protective gear on:

If you’ve got the jacket, pay particular attention to where the zippers all come together under your chin, and use the Velcro that is there to prevent any stray bees from getting inside your veil. It’s smart to tuck your pants into your socks, too, and we know you’re already wearing close-toed shoes, right? Put your gloves on last.

Now go get your package of bees:

Spray the bees lightly through the screen with the bottle of sugar syrup. This makes them sticky—which accomplishes several things. Firstly it distracts them from you, which you want. Secondly it gives them something to do—they will begin cleaning themselves up once you spray them. And thirdly, it makes it more difficult for them to fly. And since you want them to go inside the hive cavity and stay there until you get the top bars over them and the roof on, this is a pretty good method of doing that.

Next pry the lid from the top of the package of bees. Your goal is to remove the queen cage, and then the can of feed that came in the package. This is a little harder than it sounds. The queen cage usually lifts right out. The round hole that the can of feed is set in is usually a very tight fit. The best method we have found for getting it out is to push down on the side of the can next to where the queen cage is installed, then catch hold of the raised edge and lift it more or less straight out. Be patient and work carefully, there's no real hurry here. Once you've got the queen cage and the can out, set the lid back on over the hole you've made, to keep the bees inside.



One exit of the queen cage will be filled with sugar candy. There will likely be a cover of some kind over this candy plug — and you must remove this cover so that the bees can get to the candy plug.

If it is a metal flap, you can simply bend it back. If it is a cork, use a screw to remove it —poke the screw into the cork, twist, and pull it out.

Sometimes there is a cork in both ends of the queen's cage - be sure that any corks you remove are actually covering a candy plug, and that they are not the only thing keeping the queen inside the cage!

You should be able to use that metal lid to attach the cage to a top bar. Some queen cages come with thin metal strips attached that hold them in the package—these are also good for attaching the queen cage to a top bar. Using whatever method seems reasonable—attach the queen's cage firmly to the beveled downward point of one of the top bars. The bees will go to work to eat the candy in the exit hole, and release the queen over the course of the next several days.

Now for the big moment:

Give the bees one last light spray with sugar syrup. Pick up the package, holding the lid over the hole, and firmly “bonk” a corner of the package on the ground. This will cause the bees to fall into a loose pile. Now take the lid away from the hole, and simply pour and shake the bees into that empty space in the hive that you prepared between the two follower boards. Thump on the box a little bit to help knock the majority of the bees out of the box and into the hive. When most of them are in the hive, set the box with its stragglers beneath the hive. They will find their way in eventually.



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Pick up the remaining top bars, and place them over the cavity you poured the bees into. Make sure they touch. If there is extra space, and sometimes there is, since wood expands and contracts due to heat and moisture, then make sure the extra space is outside of the follower boards, and then fill it in with some of the ten spacers that come with your kit.

Next, set the gabled roof of the hive in place.

Now you can step back, and take a deep breath.



If this is your first hive—**Congratulations!** You are now a beekeeper!

In 3-5 days you will want to open the hive, and take a look at the queen cage to be sure the queen has been released by the bees. If she has, you can now remove the queen cage. A sharp steak knife will help in this process if your bees have built wax onto the queen cage and it's helpful for prying the pushpin out as well.

Refill the feeder as necessary, and keep your eye on the feeder until you notice that they have stopped eating the sugar syrup and are now foraging on plants and flowers instead.

Enjoy your bees!