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HOW TO CAPTURE SWARMS

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A swarm of bees in May
Is worth a load of hay.
A swarm of bees in June
Is worth a silver spoon.
A swarm of bees in July
Isn't worth a fly.

- Anon. -

The values set on swarms in this verse are based on the length of time it takes a swarm to become strong enough to store surplus noney for winter. Another factor we should consider in figuring the value of a swarm is the ease or difficulty of catching it. We can catch a swarm high in a poplar tree, but not as safely or cheaply as one hanging from a shrub only a foot or two off the ground.

We must start out with a modern movable frame hive fitted with drawn combs, or frames of foundation in which to put the swarm. We can catch a swarm in a bushel basket or cardboard carton of similar size, but we should shake the bees from such a container into a hive within three days. Our best way is to shake the bees immediately in front of a good hive.

The Capture

How we will catch a swarm depends largely on where it is located. Swarming bees will cluster on almost any imaginable object. Trees, bushes, fence posts, cars, mail boxes, and house walls are only a few of the many places from which swarms have been taken.

If we are luck and the swarm is on a bush or tree within easy reach of the ground, our best way to capture it is to gently cut the branch on which the bees are clustered and carefully carry it to the hive. We should lay it on the ground against the entrance and with a stick brush a few of the bees into the entrance. As soon as a few bees find the hive, they enter and signal the rest to follow.

When the swarm is on a number of small branches, or on one too large or valuable to cut, we should move the hive or box immediately underneath the swarm. We hit the branch on which the bees are clustered with a sharp

jarring blow to knock the swarm loose. They should fall right in front of the hive or inside the box or basket. If it is a hive, some will find the entrance and march in, setting up a scent trail for the others to follow. If we have caught them in a box or basket, as soon as we have most of them, we cover the container and carry it to the hive and pour the bees on the ground in front of the entrance. Some bees will recluster in the original position, but with frequent jarring and shaking we should prevent much of a cluster from forming. If a hive is not available right away, leave the covered box near the clustering place until most of the flying bees have alighted on it. Then we can carry the box, with the bees in and on it, to a cool, dark place such as a cellar or garage until a hive is available.

If the swarm is more than a few feet off the ground, we may not be able to shake the bees directly in front of or into a hive. A basket or box then is necessary. The higher the swarm, the more danger there is in climbing after it. We should not take on too much risk. Sometimes a basket can be fastened to a long pole and raised up to the swarm in such a way as to jar the bees into it.

Odd Situations

When the swarm is clustered where it cannot be moved or shaken, we will have to get them in some other way. A swarm on a flat vertical surface or corner can be scraped into a container held underneath. In a situation where they can't be scraped, brushed, or shaken down, they can sometimes be smoked up into an inverted box or basket with at least one edge in contact with the bees. This is a slow process but usually quite effective.

Each swarm capture presents its own problem, which we have to solve the best we can. The important thing is to get as many bees as possible in our hive or box, hoping to get the queen in this way. If most of the cluster forms again on the branch within a half-hour, we didn't get the queen and must try again.

Once the swarm is in the hive, we can carry it to its permanent location immediately or still better, move it in the evening when all the bees have gone inside. It is best to wait a week before examining it. Caught early in May, a large swarm with a good queen often gives us a crop of honey by fall.

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