

Prepping Your Wax for Show

The beeswax and cosmetics divisions of our NJ Honey Show typically get way fewer entries than the Extracted Honey division. The odds of taking a ribbon in these classes are therefore much higher. This article will cover the basics of getting your beeswax ready to make something lovely: tapers, novelty candles, or even some amazing artistic creation that will have everyone oohing and aahing. And, of course, if you plan to make cream, lip balm, or soap using your beeswax, you must start with your best, cleanest wax.

The color standard for beeswax is lemon yellow or straw yellow. Many of you will ask, "How can I get my wax to be that color?" The answer is that you can't really. You can't *make* your wax lemon yellow. But you *can* collect and separate lemon yellow wax if you're smart and lucky. The color of beeswax is a function of the nectar and pollen the bees are feeding on when they produce the wax. Notice, for example, how beige the wax is when you're feeding sugar syrup in quantities large enough that the bees build some burr comb. Sugar syrup makes beige wax. And that pure yellow that is the show standard comes from spring nectar sources, particularly linden or basswood, and black locust. Summer and fall nectar sources typically produce a more amber wax, although that's not *always* the case. I have noticed that one or two of the many nectar-producing goldenrods result in a yellow wax. So if you have some bees in areas where they are bringing in linden or locust nectar, keep the cappings from those yards separate from your other cappings. That's your show wax. It should also be harvested from frames that have not had brood in them, just honey.

Now let's get that wax ready to use! We'll assume you have a bucket of cappings, nicely drained so they're fairly dry. The next step is to get yourself a fairly large old pot you don't plan to use for anything else, put your cappings in it and cover them with water. The exact amount of water is not important. Just put enough so the cappings are covered. Put the pot on the stove and set the heat to medium. Because the wax is actually in water, you do not need to use a double boiler. However, every beekeeper should be very aware of the fire risk of beeswax. Never melt it directly over an open flame. Never walk away with wax on the stove. It's extremely flammable and tragic stories abound about homes and honey houses going down in flames from a wax fire. As soon as the wax has melted, remove the pot from the heat. A cardinal rule of working with beeswax, both for candles and cosmetics, is to *never overheat your wax!*

Next, you're going to pour the melted wax-water mixture into a container big enough to hold it all, preferably made of sturdy but flexible plastic. A plastic bucket works well. Again, this is probably not something you are going to use for anything but wax. The deeper the container, the better. You will get more usable wax with a tall, narrow container rather than a wide shallow one. As the wax cools, it will rise to the top and the water, containing most of the dirt and impurities, will sink. You

then pop the wax block out of the bucket (which is why you want something flexible rather than rigid) and scrape off the dirty bottom part. A chisel works well for this. If you wish, you can keep the scrapings and clean them separately from the show wax, but using the same method described for the next step.

For the next step, I like to collect empty cardboard milk cartons and quart-size plastic yogurt containers. I wash them carefully and save them. They'll receive clean melted wax and be destroyed once the wax has hardened. I also collect tin coffee cans in 1 pound and larger sizes. I find these invaluable for working with wax because you can easily dent the rim to form a spout and the smaller cans fit nicely inside the larger ones, which gives me a cheap and disposable double boiler.

Using a hammer and chisel, and covering the wax block with a cheap plastic bag or cloth to keep wax chips from flying all over your kitchen, break your wax block into chunks small enough to fit in one of the 1-pound (perfectly clean and dry!) coffee cans that you have made a spout in. Pushing the rim against a sharp counter or table edge works perfect to make a spout. Put some water into one of the bigger coffee cans and set the smaller can, filled with chunks of wax, inside. The smaller can may float a little but the water shouldn't come up more than about 2/3 of the way up the sides or else some water might bubble over into your wax. Set it on medium high heat to melt. You can add more chunks of wax as it melts.

Now make your filters. Cut the top off the cardboard milk container. Yogurt containers need no extra step. Make sure the containers are perfectly clean and dry. Cut a square of cloth from a clean rag big enough to fit over the top of the container and make a shallow bowl inside it, secured with a rubber band. Just about any fabric will do but I find sweat shirt material works particularly well in trapping impurities.

As soon as the wax has melted, remove the small coffee can from the larger one using a small pliers as an improvised handle, and pour the melted wax through the filter cloth and into the mold. Wait for the wax to harden completely. Then cut or rip away the mold. You should have a perfectly clean, absolutely beautiful block of your very own beeswax.

That's it, folks!

Now....what are you going to do with that gorgeous block of beeswax?? Stay tuned for the next installment!

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