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Our Harvesting Issue!

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Why harvesting is important



Harvesting protects your bees from pest invasion and increases their survival while hibernating.

There are a variety of pests, that through removing them, prevents their damaging effect to next year's mason bees. Hitchhikers such as pollen mites are known to overwinter in unharvested holes. Next spring, your emerging mason bees carry these mites into your yard producing even more mites. ...which reduces your bee population the

following year as you'll have more mites in more holes... you get the idea. Harvesting your cocoons is important to ensure you have enough bees for next year's pollination

Once harvested, refrigerate your slumbering cocoons. This is another great way to ensure they survive a long winter's hibernation.

This Bee-Mail provides you an overview for harvesting. Visit our website for detailed information, including demonstration pictures and videos. A new feature is our "[BeeFiles](#)" which houses various documents you can conveniently download and/or print, such as harvesting instructions.



The harvesting section is found in our [Learn page](#). Click on the left menu bar "When to do what" and then find the harvesting section to the right.

If you haven't visited the new website, ALL mason bee information is found on one page versus about 80 from our previous website. This was a lot of work, but we're pleased with the results. The website is MUCH faster than before...

Consider a Harvest Party!



Harvesting is more fun if you invite others to join in. It's also educational for children and your friends. We created another [BeeFile](#) on harvesting parties: Tips for a BYOB (Bring Your Own Bees) harvesting party. (You'll also find this link online in our harvest section.)

We're encouraging nurseries around the nation to host these parties in their garden centers. The only thing missing is you, the mason bee expert. If you

have harvested mason bee cocoons before, or have held a cocoon in your hand, you have expertise over your peers who haven't harvested yet. 😊

Talk with your local nursery and see if this is an event you can try with them. We'll help you think this through. Send us an email.

If you live the Seattle area, we have an open house harvest party on October 4th, between 10-4. To help us plan on numbers of harvesters, [please register here](#).

Please do us a favor. We need more pictures of people harvesting. Please take a picture of your group with your cocoons, shredded tubes/reeds, or whatever. Send a few to us! Tell us who is in your group (Garden club? Family?) and where you live. We'd love to post your harvesting experiences our website or in Facebook/Twitter/Pinterest. Thanks!

How to harvest cocoons

It's quite easy to harvest cocoons. If you have put your hands into your earthy garden, then you won't be squeamish about touching these durable cocoons. (smaller left is a male, larger right is a female)



Gather your harvesting tools: Paper to cover your kitchen table, a table knife or pair of scissors, sand or water, a bowl or two, a colander/sifter, good music in the background, a HumidiBee to store cocoons, and a trashcan for pests.



Separate any suspicious tubes. If there are holes in the sides, these cocoons are mostly mono filled.

You'll open these last.

Open your nesting material

Open your [tubes/reeds](#)/and [trays](#). (Our website has opening instructions on each product.)



We have a really nice [harvesting tool](#) you might want to use for wood trays (Thanks Randy!)

All you're doing now is separating good guys (cocoon) from bad guys (everything else.) Be cautious when finding a hole in a cocoon. This cocoon is from last year's bees that weren't cleaned out, or it has been invaded by a pest. Throw hole cocoons away, and be on the hunt if you suspect a pest.

The brown stuff you see on the cocoons above is the feces from the larva. As they wove their cocoons, they pushed it outside. I would have done that too... It's natural and not mites.

Two things to look for: Pollen mites and chalkbrood.



Pollen mites were carried in by your bees and scraped off with the gathered pollen. The mites had so much food with them, they ate it all before your mason bee could. The bees typically died in the spring.

Chalkbrood is a nasty spore that, if found is a really big deal. Try to not touch it. At the end of your harvest party, you'll want to wash your trays and cocoons in a bleach/water solution to kill the spore.



Chalkbrood and other pests you may encounter are found in our Pest section on the [Learn page](#). We also tell you what to do with them. Sprinkling them on your morning oatmeal isn't on our list of solutions... 😞

It really is this simple... open things up and pull out your cocoons. Your cocoons are VERY durable. You can drop them or soak them in water.

What else did you find?

Things you may find:



Earwigs. (Place them outside)



Beneficial wasps. You may find larva separated by mud, grass, or something else. In general, very thin-walled cocoons are solitary beneficial wasps. They typically appear in later summer. I'd store these with your cocoons in your HumidiBee and place them in a BeeGuardian

bag in the spring for later development.



Leafcutter cocoons. These are very durable, but don't wash them. Place these in your HumidiBee along with your mason bee cocoons. They will overwinter as larva and fly in the summer.

Other mason bees. You may find other nesting substrate like resin, pebbles, leaf bits, chewed up leafy material, cottony looking stuff, and who knows what else.

DON'T THROW THEM AWAY. Send us a picture and we'll get them identified with researchers across the country. It's a great way to learn about other bees in our backyards and communities.

We do want to know the strange bees/wasps/items you found. Send us a picture. When sharing pictures with us, we'd like your permission to post them in Facebook, Pinterest, and potentially on our website. Help us teach others!

Cleaning cocoons

Do you need to clean your cocoons?

If you didn't find mites or chalkbrood, then no. Your job is done, and your cocoons are ready for overwintering in your refrigerator.

If you have pollen mites in the mix, then there are a few cleaning methods that work well.

Sand: toss your cocoons into dry or wet sand and mix the cocoons for a bit. (Remember, they are very durable.) Sieve the cocoons out using a colander. Rinse the sand off with water. The mites stay with the sand. (Gordon Hutchings from British Columbia devised this method.)



Water: toss your cocoons into a COLD bowl of water and agitate with your hands. We use a garden hose with a nozzle on medium blast and swirl the cocoons in a colander. Again... the bees are very durable! *Take care not to overfill your bowl (or bucket) of water and send your cocoons over the edge.*

Your cocoons are waterproof and can stay in water for up to 30 minutes. You don't need to soak them this long, but don't be afraid that you'll drown your bees.

Pat the cocoons lightly dry with a paper towel or cloth towel and they're clean! (Wet cocoons into a refrigerator are just fine.)

If you found ANY chalkbrood, then soak all cocoons in 1 cup bleach water to 1 gallon of water for about 5 minutes. An organic substitute might be vinegar or baking powder in the water. I haven't investigated this yet and will ask our researcher peers to know if this works. This same procedure applies if you are using wood trays. Give them a quick brushing with the bleach solution, rinse them with cleansing water, dry each tray off quickly, and then immediately bind the wood trays together. Don't let them dry unstacked and bound as they may warp.

Our Bee BuyBack program

Before you place all of your bees into your refrigerator, consider how many you need for next season's pollination. Hopefully you have more bees than you started with last season. If you are not adding more garden food for bees, consider our Bee BuyBack program.



There is only so much pollen in your yard. I find that after my Big Leaf Maples stop flowering, my thousand or so mason bees dwindle down to about 40 to 50. The 900 plus nesting mason bees don't have enough pollen and fly elsewhere.

Mason bees need pollen and will leave your yard in search of it.

After a million gardeners have watched the [Growing A Greener World episode on mason bees](#), we believe we're going to see an increased demand for mason bees. We'd like to exchange your mason bees for free nesting material. We'll also reimburse you for your USPS ground shipping charges.

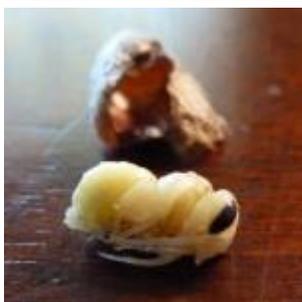
Last year we sold bees from Texas, Michigan, New York, New Jersey, Washington, Oregon, Utah, and various other states across the US to gardeners. We succeeded in getting these bees rehomed to gardeners in nearby states. Bees already acclimated to a region are healthier. We want bees to thrive, not just survive so we ship them regionally!

Please consider our [Bee BuyBack program](#). (Read the lower article on farmers we're teaming with. It's a very mason bee-intense program.)

If you're interested in teaming with us and sending us your excess cocoons, [please visit this webpage](#). We have a short form for you to fill out.

You can ship your cocoons to us now through early January. Sooner is better! We want to get them settled into a perfect temperature that will keep them still and cool all winter.

Storing your mason bees for winter hibernation



Before you store your bees for the winter... make sure they are fully developed.

Mason bees need to be completely developed for the winter or they die.

If you have just a few mason bees (1-50) wait until October 1st and then store the bees.

If you have more than 50, open up a few small cocoons (males). You will be killing them, but if you place all bees into a refrigerator and they aren't developed, then they will die anyway.

If you wait too long, your bees are expending valuable fat reserves in the warm fall weather. They are weaker in the spring, especially with abnormally long winters.

You may want to watch a video I did last year on "how to check a bee for development" on the website [harvesting](#) section. (Note... the next video down shows how to open cocoons with a pair of scissors. It's *much* easier than using a razor blade.)

A "completely developed bee" is black all over with hair and fully developed wings. (Brown if hornfaced). You will find that the bee splays out its middle two legs. I'm not sure why they do this, but it says "I still need to hibernate" to me.

If you find your emerged bees all developed, place your cocoons into a refrigerator.

If you find your bees are *not all developed*, "Cold Shock" them. Place the cocoons in a cold 45°F (7°C) area for about 1 day. Bring them out into the warmth for a week or so, and then another cold day and wait one last week. The cold shocking sends a message to the late bees to "hurry up!" Check a few cocoons prior to refrigerating them.



Lastly, place your cocoons into your refrigerator in a [HumidiBee](#) or similar container. Try to set your refrigerator temperature around 34-35°F (1°C). Your modern frost-free refrigerator dehydrates things, including your hibernating bees... Add a tablespoon or so of water and occasionally add more water each month.

If you are reluctant to store bees in your refrigerator, a cold cellar or garage will suffice, though steady cold, almost at freezing is far superior than fluctuating temperatures. The fat reserves deplete quicker with warmer temperatures! Be wary of rodents looking for tasty morsels.

City Fruit, a wonderful Seattle program



We've received quite a few pictures from mason bee fans that needed boards to hold up fruit tree limbs. (Thanks for sending them to us!)

Here's a note from Saul a few weeks ago:

[I have the most blue orchard bees ever this year \(I have placed nesting containers everywhere \) and I have the largest fruit harvest in 30 years. Way to go blue bees.](#)

I also had/have too many apples, peaches, and tomatoes from our various mason and leafcutter bees buzzing around my yard. I hate to see good fruit head towards the compost pile because we just couldn't eat it.

Look for local food banks and community resources who would love to share your produce with hungry folks, and those who can't grow fresh food.

There's a group in Seattle that is solving this dilemma locally, and making a difference. [City Fruit](#) is a non-profit organization in Seattle that:

...promotes the cultivation of urban fruit in order to nourish people, build community and protect the climate. We help tree owners grow healthy fruit, provide assistance in harvesting and preserving fruit, promote the sharing of extra fruit, and work to protect urban fruit trees.

Excess fruit heads towards people that can't grow it or are hungry. Sustainability... Education... Sharing... What an awesome model for other cities

in the world to consider. It just takes one good idea, a bit of passion, and a few like-minded souls to partner with.

I'm meeting with Kate, their Executive Director, this Friday to see where Crown Bees can partner with City Fruit to get more mason bees into the hands of their city growers, who in turn will have that much more fruit. This is another great way to work with people wanting to make a difference in the world!

Reaching Northwest orchard managers



It's finally happening. Crown Bees, along with several peers of ours in WA/ID/UT, have enough mason bees to begin pollinating orchards purposely.

This season, Chris, an organic cherry farmer in Hood River, OR, had a record ten tons of cherries from one of her acres using mason bees. Her previous record was 2.5 tons.

Every cherry farmer we worked with this past season had great results with hard to pollinate crops.

As a result of these awesome trials, we're now reaching out to orchard managers in WA, OR, UT, and CA to help them achieve increased pollination and fruit production.

We're also working with several organizations of organic farmers, co-ops, progressive farmers, farmers that work with Small Business Association, etc. We're planning small meetings in 7 orchard cities (Wenatchee, Yakima, Tri-Cities, Wasatch area, Hood River, Salem, and possibly Stockton.) These meetings will occur in the first weeks of November, and will hopefully bring forward about 1,000 acres for mason bees to pollinate in this spring. Exciting stuff!

Where do these bees come from? Many are wild trapped in forests and private land. Many are given to us by gardeners like you. It's a wonderful model and an even more awesome position to be in today.

We'll let you know how many farmers we find. Thank you for teaming with us in the [Bee BuyBack program](#).

A last thought, an award we received

Today's GardenCenter

We team with nurseries that carry our products in their stores. At a recent trade show in Portland, we received a nice award for "Retailers Choice". A panel of retail nursery owners walked the show and looked for:

Products were selected specifically for garden retailers in search of the best new products — both live goods and hard goods — for their stores.

It was an honor to receive it. ([See the article](#)) Our small company is doing something right! We hope more nurseries across the country consider selling mason bees to their gardeners. We'll then have more bees to buy back for regional orchards!

In our next issue...

- I'm not sure yet. I'll be attending the Orchard Bee Association later this month in Salt Lake City. I should have something fun to write about.

Thank you for caring about raising solitary mason bees! Your success is important to us.

Dave Hunter, Owner

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