

"We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

– Oscar Wilde

We've noted many times that beekeepers, as a species, love to argue. It often seems that the heat of the argument is inversely related to its importance with respect to maintaining order in the universe. The very best positions in an argument are ones that allow us to snort in derision at the foolish stance that our unenlightened comrades have adopted. Rarely are these interchanges concerned with educating others or, dare we suggest it, educating ourselves – they are instead merely exercises in establishing barnyard pecking order.

Today's topic for polarized division is glass versus plastic jars for our honey. To run off on a tangent for a moment: why do we usually talk about glass jars but plastic bottles, when they look and behave the same? For example, we "bottle" our honey, even when we put it in jars... hmm. The online Oxford dictionary says that a bottle is "a container, typically made of glass or plastic and with a narrow neck, used for storing drinks or other liquids." A jar is said to be, "a wide-mouthed cylindrical container made of glass or pottery and typically having a lid, used especially for storing food." So clearly wide-mouth Mason jars are jars and Coke bottles are bottles. Maybe the confusion is over whether the classic honey container we all know and love, aka "queenline jars", has a narrow neck or is wide-mouthed? Is that an issue of relativity and perhaps opinion? Nevertheless, it doesn't make linguistic sense to bottle honey in jars or jar honey in bottles. Should we make a New Year's Resolution to start talking as if we are well versed in English semantics? Naw, that ain't no fun.

Back to beekeeping and products of the hive: there are advantages and disadvantages to plastic and glass containers, be they bottles, jars, boxes, orbs or tubes. Anything that is airtight and nonporous is a candidate for storing



The classic "queenline" glass jar (left) also comes in a plastic version (right). Why is the glass version typically called a jar while the plastic version is called a bottle? I'm so confused!

honey. But what are the practical considerations?

Glass

- Glass has a transparency that somehow isn't quite matched by plastic, causing honey to sparkle and look it's very best.
- Glass containers are typically more expensive than the same-sized plastic version, but ironically that can be an advantage because it creates an impression that the contents are higher quality.
- Glass containers full of crystallized/ granulated honey can be gently warmed to return the honey to its liquid state without any risk of the container becoming distorted by the heat. See "[Crunchy Honey: Why Honey Granulates and What to Do About It](#)" for more on that topic.
- Certain types of popular retail containers only seem to be commonly available in glass. Examples include Muth bottles and hex jars.
- Glass containers generally hold up well when subjected to hot-water cleaning and reuse, although this isn't a consideration when retailing honey. But it is important when your family are the ones consuming most of your honey and you are reusing containers year after year.



It is more common to see clever bottle designs in plastic versus glass, but this glass bear dares to be creative. Just don't squeeze it too hard!

Plastic

- Modern plastic containers aren't likely to break when dropped. This factor is a biggie.
- Plastic containers are considerably lighter than the same-sized glass version. This can be an important factor for elderly or infirmed customers as well as when transporting large quantities. Just as an empty five-gallon plastic bucket weighs quite a bit less than an empty five-gallon glass carboy, a case of honey-filled glass bottles is much heftier than a case of plastic ones.
- Plastic containers are usually squeezable, enabling a more user-friendly product-delivery experience with less mess.
- Although innovative glass container options exist, clever designs such as bears, bees, honey-comb patterns, etc. are much more widely available and affordable in plastic than glass.
- Overall, plastic containers are typically cheaper than glass ones.
- On the downside, plastic containers can easily distort and warp when washed in hot water.
- Similarly, extreme care must be taken when warming crystalized honey in plastic containers. Being too warm, too warm for



Honey connoisseur Winnie the Pooh with one of his many honey pots.

Illustration by E.H. Shepard

too long or too close to the heat source can distort plastic. Droopy honey bears are sad-looking, not cute.

Not all-inclusive

The astute reader will realize that this discussion is not all-inclusive with regard to honey containers. Winnie the Pooh kept his honey in what appears to be a ceramic honey pot, complete with the word "Hunny" inscribed on it. (What is the difference between a honey pot and a honey jar?) Honey sticks (honey stored in thin plastic tubes six or so inches long) are very popular at fairs and exhibitions. I don't recall ever seeing honey packaged in wax-coated paper containers like orange juice comes in; perhaps they can lose their structural integrity over the long term?

Regardless, the best container for your honey is the one that works best for you. Make sure you consider all of the plusses, minuses, caveats and cost of your options and then dogmatically defend your choice at the next beekeepers' meeting!

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