

Spring Preparations / Management, Janice Furness

1. GET YOUR BEES THROUGH THE WINTER!

1a) Feed – starvation is the commonest cause of colony loss. A colony needs at least 40lbs of stores to overwinter. A full deep frame holds 5lbs, so 8 full frames essential. Feed 2:1 syrup in early autumn (I always add thymol to this (crystals dissolved in meths or surgical spirit, then 2 teaspoons per gallon of syrup), or – even better –

Apisuc/Ambrosia, which the bees love. They'll take down a gallon of this in no time. Then place a block of fondant directly on top of cluster (just cut out an oblong of polythene cover so that fondant is kept soft, with exposed fondant on underside, next to bees). Better to be on the safe side and give more than they'll need as you can sort it out in spring if there's too much, but you can't sort it out in the spring if they've starved!

1b) Hive – mouse guards early October. Duck tape for any poor joins between hive parts. Straps or heavy stones to protect against wind. 2" polystyrene blocks for extra insulation, over crown board/under roof, or, if fondant present, put a large piece of hardboard over fondant, then polystyrene, then crown board. (Bees will nibble polystyrene if it's directly over fondant). Check, especially after gales, that roof still on, hive still upright, mouse guard still in place!

1c) Varroa treatment – Never believe you haven't got varroa! Treat the bees or lose them! Best treatment at present is **Apivar**, thick, stiff strips which hang between the frames for 6-10 weeks. Apivar is only available through a vet. To learn more about Apivar contact The Bee Vet on **01392 872887** or info@bee-vet.co.uk. You should also use **oxalic acid trickle** in late December/early January, ie when no or minimal brood present. 35g oxalic acid, 1 litre water warmed to 60C, 1 kilo sugar. Dilute sugar in warmed water, stir in crystals, cool to 37C and keep warm in vacuum flask. Apply 4 mls per seam of bees. Have floor insert in place so that you can see how many mites drop. (nb Gavin thought this solution rather weak, he uses half as much again).

2. WINTER JOBS AT HOME:

2a) Tidy your bee shed, noting what new equipment you'll need for the next season.

2b) Equipment: Buy and make up new boxes, frames (but don't add foundation until you need them), cover cloths. Sterilise old boxes with a flame-torch, and smarten/weatherproof with a coat of Ducksback or equivalent. Cut up a supply of smoker fuel.

2c) Check your bee suit – darn any burn holes etc, replace elastic in cuffs etc (you will have been washing it regularly, I'm sure). Build up a supply of Marigolds once they're no longer good for washing up. Remember a right hand glove turned inside out becomes a left hand one, and vice versa.

2d) Prepare a crown board for swarm control: cover feeder holes with mesh or glass, cut out 2" from one side of rim and you have a new floor with entrance (I usually put entrance at back) to use under top box when dividing colony to control swarming.

2e) Prepare record cards / notebook. Keeping records is essential. You should note the following:

- Inspection date, hive number, colour/age of Q and whether marked and clipped;
- evidence of Q – either seen herself, or eggs;
- number of seams of bees or frames of brood, ie rate of expansion;
- space for Q to lay and for incoming nectar to be stored;
- adequate stores – if kept in by weather they'll get through 10lbs a week
- signs of disease
- signs of swarm intent
- character of bees – quiet, calm, running, stinging etc

3. SIGNS OF LIFE AT HIVE ENTRANCE. A lot can be learnt from observing hive entrance.

Fine crumbs of wax – the bees are uncapping stores. Bigger flakes are a sign of a mouse.

Dead bees – undertakers at work trying to remove corpses! Sometimes these get stuck in the mouse guard – remove it for a few hours to let the bees do their work! **Cleansing flights** - On mild days in late winter/early spring it is a joy to see bees taking a cleansing flight. They've been holding it in a long time, so a few streaks of faeces on hive front are not a bad sign, but too many could indicate dysentery or noseema. (If on later proper inspection you find frames covered with streaks, replace them.)

Pollen - It is an even greater thrill if some of them are bringing in pollen – a sign the queen has survived, is starting to lay and they have brood to feed!

4. **FIRST INSPECTION** (Late March? Warm, still day)

4.1. Give them a clean floor and brood box: Slide hive 3' along stand; put new floor and brood box on original site; lift frames, keeping order, into new box. Clean old floor and box thoroughly before re-use.

4.2. Inspection: As you lift frames, quickly check for queen and or eggs. The queen is likely to be on a centre frame, where there are new eggs – don't waste time on outer frames. Ideally there will be worker brood in all stages, but no drone brood. Drone brood this early would indicate either a failing old queen, or, more likely after last summer, a poorly mated young one. Patchy drone brood and no worker brood, with more than one egg per cell and eggs on side rather than base of cell means laying workers rather than a queen. Take hive as far away as you can carry, and shake all bees off frames – viable ones will fly back to one of the other hives.

Note how many frames of brood. Note whether stores adequate or too many. Uncapping frame of stores either side of brood nest will encourage them to empty and use for queen to lay. If far too many frames of stores, remove some and keep for later needs, eg making nucs or feeding to colonies short of stores. Replace with drawn comb.

4.3. Marking and clipping queen: *Either* use a queen cage and mark through it, then wait for her to (hopefully) stick a wing through and clip off half of it. *Or* (if right handed) pick up queen by wings with right hand, transfer to left holding legs or thorax, pick up pen or scissors with right and mark / clip. Practise this on drones first – the last thing you want is to risk damaging your queen!

4.4. Replace old comb: Any old (3-4 years?), blackish or badly drawn comb should have been put to the outsides in the autumn (it may well have had stores/brood in it, which you want the bees to be able to use) and will now be empty. Replace with drawn comb if you have any. Otherwise, put in dummy board and wait till bees really flying to add foundation, with syrup to help them draw it out. Do not put foundation as outside frame – put nearer brood nest. Nb deep frames will be better drawn if above the brood nest, and it's a good idea to give a strong colony a full box of deep foundation to draw out, which you can use as you need.

5. **HELPING THEM BUILD UP**

OSR seems to get earlier each year. To get a good crop from it you need a strong colony with plenty of foragers. So, 6 -9 weeks before OSR flowers, start feeding **syrup or Apisuc/Ambrosia** (3 weeks from egg to bee, 3 weeks as house/nurse bee, means 6 weeks before you have foragers!). Keep feeding until OSR flowering or Q will reduce laying.

Pollen supplement – Nektapoll from Thornes, placed directly over brood nest, will help them build up more quickly in the spring. Or make your own patties – but don't buy the pollen from health stores etc, as it will be foreign – use your own, collected the previous summer.

6. WEEKLY INSPECTIONS FROM LATE APRIL to be sure you don't miss signs of swarm intent and to check space / add another super. (See 2e) Record Cards.) Think ahead – make sure you have everything to hand you might need so that you have the colony open for the minimum time. If you can, work with a partner – much easier, quicker, much more fun.