
THE BEEKEEPING YEAR AWAKENS

Its early March, the days are getting longer, and the bees are flying on the occasional warm day. Forage is available in the form of snowdrops, helibores and crocuses. A comforting sign will be workers taking in pollen for feeding larvae. If this is happening there is most probably a queen present.

If, sadly, your hive has not survived the winter, close the entrance to prevent other bees getting in pending investigation. They may have died from disease, which you wouldn't wish to spread

What you can't do with beekeeping is be prescriptive about action dates. What you do and when you do it largely depends on the weather and rate of colony build-up. Not only is this a matter of judgement, it is also a skill that a beekeeper has to develop.

Should the weather be poor and your bees can't forage, this is one of the most dangerous times of the year for your colony(ies) as they could so easily starve – a disaster for the bees and beekeepers who have treated the bees for varroa, fed the bees in autumn and who won't be able to get re-started for at least two months. If shortage of stores is a concern, place fondant icing over the hole in the crown-board – two kilos is suggested as a guide quantity if the hive is to be examined again in a fortnight or less.

No later than at this time, you should have checked your equipment. Does your suit need washing – residual stings can make bees aggressive. De-coke your smoker and make sure you have fuel to hand. Ensure your veil is not damaged. Do you need to order supplies – e.g. wax and frames? This is a good time to obtain your tickets for the BBKA Convention, where you can “convert” wax into foundation. Ensure you have stock of washing soda to make up a sterilizing solution for your hive tool. With the benefit of your hive records, remind yourself of the age of your queen(s). This will help you to know if a colony is likely to swarm, whether the queen is likely to perform poorly or be superseded. Do your records tell you that you have an aggressive colony? Should you be considering re-queening? If you plan to increase your colonies, consider hive location, sort out a hive stand etc.

At the earliest opportunity, when the weather is warm, the brood chamber can be examined using the 5 point plan: Is there brood/a queen present, do they have stores, is there any evidence of pests or disease, is there enough room for expansion (likely at this time) and are there any queen cells (very unlikely at this time). It is now time to remove the mouse guards.

With the population low at this time, the queen should be relatively easy to find. Mark or re-mark her if necessary. Should there be an excess of stores which limits the queen's laying space, a frame or two can be replaced with foundation. The removed stores can be wrapped in cling film and kept cool for use later when making up nucs

You must have a policy of brood frame replacement, as old cells can harbour disease and with continual use for brood rearing, the cells get smaller. Unless your combs are all really old or are otherwise in a bit of a mess, it is a good idea to change three to four each year, so that over a 4 year cycle, all combs are exchanged for fresh wax. If your combs are generally a mess, then a shook swarm or Bailey comb change might be a better approach. Pick a time in the season to change the combs when there is a good honey flow to facilitate the drawing out of the comb. As long as three or four combs are changed each year there is no rush to do it, and there is no need necessarily to change them all at once. Replacement frames should have the year marked on them as they are very likely to get mixed up and it helps in selecting which frames to replace next. The wax removed from used brood frames should be disposed of as the wax cannot be salvaged. Apparently used combs make good firelighters! The frames are best cleaned in a hot washing soda solution and stored for re-use

Priority frames to change are any which are badly damaged, distorted etc, otherwise go by age. If combs to be changed are in the brood nest or next to it, they should be "worked" to the outside over a few weeks to minimize loss of brood and disruption. New frames should be put next to and definitely not in the brood nest. However once drawn out and at hive temperature they should be inserted into the brood nest so as to make used combs more freely available for future replacement and so that the new frames are used for brood raising

Ideally you should exchange the hive floor with a new/clean one in order to remove debris and minimise disease. Every two to three years, you should substitute your brood box with a thoroughly clean one, again to reduce the likelihood of disease. The one removed should be scraped down, washed in washing soda solution and "flamed" to kill all sources of disease

During the winter, you should have considered your plans for the season. Do you plan to increase your colonies or replace lost colonies? What will you do if you find yourself with a swarm? Whether intending to increase your stocks or not, it is highly desirable to have spare equipment to hive a swarm – at the very least this would be welcomed by another beekeeper. A spare hive is also useful as a "bait hive".

Talking of swarms, you can learn of a swarm at the most inconvenient of times. Responsible beekeepers should always be willing to collect a swarm in the interests of public relations. Have at least the minimal kit ready i.e. a box with ventilation or skep, an old sheet and a pair of secateurs.

When seven or eight of the brood frames are covered with bees, the queen excluder and a super, which ideally has been warmed in a greenhouse, can be put on. Sometimes bees can be reluctant to enter the super especially if the foundation is not drawn out. If you can put, say, two drawn out frames in a super otherwise full of new foundation this helps. Alternatively spray a little syrup onto some of the foundation.

When the colony is in full swing, be alert for problems. Watch out for bees with distorted wings, bees crawling up the front of the hive or up blades of grass seemingly

unable to fly, or yellow marking up the front of the hive or on the top of hive bars. Insert your varroa monitoring board for a few days from time to time to see if there is evidence of a serious infestation.

Your season has now started! Congratulations to those who have successfully brought their colonies through the winter for the first time!

Tim Foden (with help from others!)
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