

Preparing honeybee colonies for winter

The importance of preparing colonies to enter the winter in a healthy state with an adequate supply of young healthy bees and stores cannot be over-emphasized. The beekeeping year starts here, so a colony overwintered in good condition ensures that it is fit for purpose in the following spring. Recent winter colony loss investigations, both in the UK and across Europe, have clearly shown links between dead colonies and the viruses, particularly deformed wing virus, which are associated with varroa infestations. It emphasizes the importance of effective and timely varroa control. This sheet is to give guidance to help beekeepers overwinter colonies successfully.

Timing.

Winter preparation is usually done after the removal of the last honey crop of the year, coinciding with any varroacide treatments that may be required. This date will vary with the apiary location, but is normally from early to mid-August. However, with late flows from crops such as Heather and Himalayan balsam it may be later, and if so particular care must be taken with respect to varroa levels and control. For instance, it may be necessary to apply a short term treatment to reduce the population of varroa prior to colonies working late flows.

Check each colony to ensure:

- **Queen-right.** It is better to overwinter colonies with young healthy queens as they are less likely to die or become drone layers. Also, the brood nest of a young healthy queen is likely to be bigger later in the season than that of an old queen, thus helping to ensure an adequate replacement of the older worker bees. This is particularly important as those older bees may have shorter lives because of the pathogens associated with varroa infestations and other bee problems. Colonies that go into winter with too few young bees are likely to dwindle rapidly in the Spring. To remain productive honey-producing colonies should be headed by queens no more than two years old. Queens with desirable traits can be kept for breeding purposes to a greater age, and many beekeepers maintain these in nucleus colonies.
- **Disease free.** Check each colony for signs of brood and adult bee diseases. Remedial action or culling should be undertaken as appropriate. If the disease found or suspected is statutorily notifiable, i.e. European or American Foul Brood, you must inform your local Bee Inspector or the National Bee Unit. Beekeepers should know the signs of these diseases and inspect colonies for foul brood and other bee diseases throughout the season, as a minimum specifically once in the spring and once in the autumn. If colonies are small find out why. If they are pest and disease free they can be united and re-queened. If diseased, remedial action can be taken but culling may be a better option. Further information about brood diseases can be found in the NBU leaflet 'Foul Brood Disease of Honey Bees and other common brood disorders'

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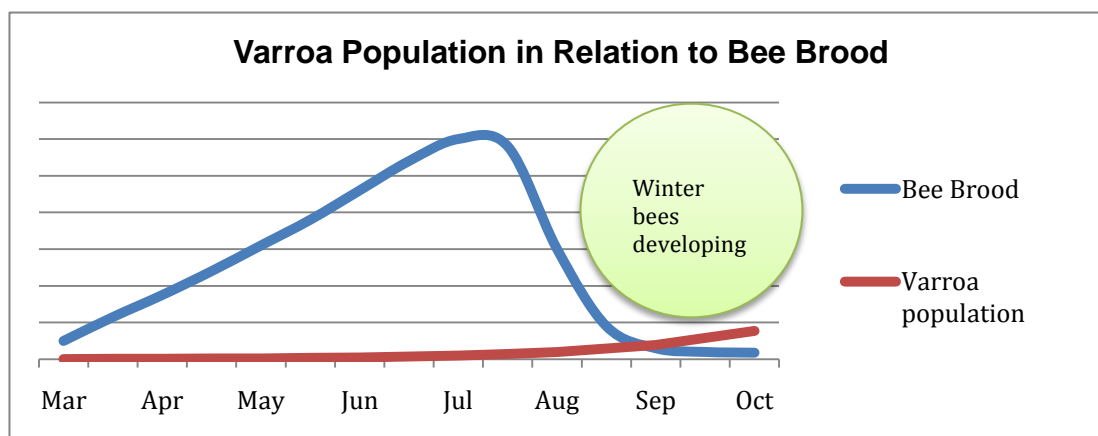
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• **Pest free.** Check each colony for the exotic pests Small Hive Beetle and *Tropilaelaps*. If you suspect they are present you must inform your local Bee Inspector or the NBU. Further information can be found in the NBU Leaflets 'The Small Hive Beetle' and 'Tropilaelaps: parasitic mites of honeybees'.

• **Varroa numbers are below the treatment or damage threshold of 1,000 mites.** Varroa must be kept below the damage threshold. If beekeepers are not monitoring varroa mite levels it is important that varroacides are used during mid-August rather than delaying treatments until September or October. This is because the bee brood population in a colony reduces significantly during July and August, whilst the varroa population is doubling every 3 to 4 weeks. As winter bees are developing in late August and early September it is important that the virus infections associated with varroa are not triggered or transmitted to them. This population principal is illustrated in the graph below. If your bees forage on late crops you should monitor infestation levels and use bio-technic control methods in early summer. With proper varroa management in early summer mite populations will be below the damage threshold during these late flows. Further details can be found in the NBU Leaflet "Managing Varroa".



• **Sufficient stores.** The amount of stores required by a colony varies with the strain of bee. It is generally considered that a honeybee colony requires about 18 – 22 kilograms of honey to safely feed it through the winter. Larger hives headed by prolific queens may require more. A BS brood frame when full of honey contains about 2.2 kg, so assess the existing colony stores and feed the required balance using winter strength sugar syrup, i.e. 1 kg. of white granulated sugar to 500 ml of water. Sugar syrup can be fed to supplement honey stores or as a substitute for them. Colonies also require ample pollen to overwinter successfully, especially to rear brood. Ensure that your overwintering bees have access to good quality pollen crops both at the end of the season and early in the following season.

• **Hive in sound condition, waterproof and well ventilated**

Apiary sites need choosing carefully to ensure that they have good access in all weather, firm but well drained ground, sunny, not in a frost pocket, good air circulation, etc. Damp rather than cold kills bees so check hives, especially roofs, to ensure rain is shed away. It is best to ensure that your hives are off the ground on suitable stands. If your apiary site is not vulnerable to windy conditions and you are using open mesh floors they can be left with the floor inserts out. If not or your hives are on solid floors then you can lift the crown board on two-millimeter laths. Used matchsticks are excellent for this purpose.

• **Protected from vermin.** Fit mouse guards to prevent access by small rodents which often nest in hives during the winter. In some areas green woodpeckers can damage hives, so if this is a known problem in your apiary or nearby a simple cage of chicken wire placed around and over the hive, at least 300 mm from the hive walls, will prevent damage whilst permitting bees to fly.

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