

Notes for August

Winter Feeding

We are fast approaching the end of the honey gathering time. Most if not all nectar secreting plants will be falling off gradually during this period and apart from heather, most of the natural flora is gradually declining. However, this doesn't mean the bees will stop gathering nectar completely during the months of August and September but it is of a reduced capacity, tailing off towards the end of the season. This is a natural progression and any activities by the beekeeper should be kept to a minimum i.e. feeding should reflect what the bees are doing naturally. In other words, you wouldn't expect them to be dealing with copious amounts of syrup late on in the year. This is one of the pitfalls of modern beekeeping; many beekeepers will feed their colony far too late which will inhibit their wintering, putting extra strain on a declining colony. Feed in early September to allow the bees to drive off excess moisture, two pounds of sugar to one pint of water replicates roughly what the honey gathered by the bees is, usually round about 17%. This ratio gives you about the same water content so the bees can take the syrup down without too much additional evaporation of moisture. One of the questions which most beekeepers will ask is how much should I give them? Generally speaking, two gallons of syrup will be sufficient for most of our indigenous bees. However, if you're dealing with a big colony you may have to give three gallons; over the years this has served us well with very little or no starvation. One word of warning though, when you've fed your bees always check they've received the food which you've given them, as there are occasions when food given will disappear. I've forgotten to mention that the bees produced in the autumn put on special body fats to enable them to pass the winter successfully, this is why early winter preparation is important.

Success in overwintering

I'll give what I think is a recipe for success; the colony should if possible be headed by a good fertile queen, preferably this year's. Good healthy bees will in most cases survive the winter without any problems. Whether your bees are healthy is a matter for you as a beekeeper to judge. On looking at different colonies over the years you gain a natural ability to judge whether a colony is right but ultimately it'll be your experience and decision. I don't know of any measurement that can be used to ascertain the health of a colony. Of course there are many tools which can be used if you feel you have a problem. You can test for Nosema and Acarine and indeed for varroa mites. All of these have a detrimental effect on the general health of the colony and should be kept under control but of course all these things should be managed well before end of the season.

History

There is no doubt that bees kept 50 or 60 years ago were subjected to some very harsh winters and seemed to have survived. Whereas in more recent times we are experiencing a warmer climate. I actually prefer it to be colder rather than warmer as the bees will go into cluster on the comb, hardly moving. However, in these warmer times bees tend to break the cluster more readily which doesn't equate to good wintering and is unnatural. The actual number of bees within the colony doesn't appear to make a great deal of difference providing the colony is healthy and queen-right. Over the years we have seen both large

and small colonies go into winter, all of which have managed to survive. Of course in the spring there'll be a difference in size, this seems to be a natural thing which occurs in most colonies. In times past, we were told that it was bad practice to try and overwinter five frame nucs, now we see many people overwintering nuclei successfully so you see folks things are changing a little.

In summary

Good healthy, well fed colonies that are headed by a current queen will, in most cases, survive the winter without a problem. A colony headed by a young queen will more than likely push on in the spring and build a good viable colony.

Supplements

I personally don't believe in any kind of medicinal supplements, feeding prophylactically or otherwise, bees should be allowed to survive naturally and build their own natural resistances. We've seen increasing use of various treatments for the control of this or that, please leave them on the shelves where they belong. However if your colony is suffering from a specific problem, that's a different scenario altogether and of course under those circumstances, I wouldn't be opposed to using the appropriate help; diagnose first and treat second.

Dave