

Preparing the bees for winter

The three main causes of winter losses are queenless colonies, starvation and varroa. All of these are within the control of the beekeeper. Your bees are a valuable asset, and they deserve your best attention. Bees first, holiday second!

You should aim to complete your winter preparation by mid October. Use our Winter Prep record card to keep track of your preparation. See website. Aim for maximum 10% winter losses.

Step 1. Mid August to early September. Check that the colony has a laying queen, eggs and larvae and sealed brood. If there is no queen, unite the colony to a queenright colony, or call for help. Your colony should have at least five deep frames of bees. I winter my hives on a brood and a half, with no queen excluder.

Step 2. Same day as step 1. Remove any part-filled supers. Check the weight of the hive by lifting one side from the stand. The hive should feel as if it is nailed down. A colony will need the equivalent of about 18kg of honey or sugar syrup to survive the winter. Any late honey stored in September is a bonus. Feed any light hives with a rapid feeder, preferably a tray feeder, Miller or Ashforth. These allow you to feed up to 10 litres of syrup very quickly. Make a syrup with one electric kettle full of hot water to 3 x 1kg bags of sugar. Reduce the hive entrance and feed in the evening to prevent robbing.

Aim to finish winter-feeding by early September. Feeding in early September stimulates the queen to continue laying for a while. If you delay feeding until October, the weather may be cold and the bees will not take the feed down.

Step 3. Remove empty feeder when hive weight is OK. Place an eke, a 40mm high square frame, on the top brood box. Place a tray of Apiguard on the top brood frames, open side up, and refit the crown board on the eke, with the feeder holes sealed.

If using an open mesh floor, fit the mite catch tray and put a square of old carpet or a slab of expanded polystyrene on the crown board. This stays on all winter.

Aim to fit your first tray of Apiguard by early September. You want a hive full of new healthy bees for the winter. If you wait til October, it's too late. You will already have a hive full of bees damaged by varroa, and very little new brood to replace them.

Step 4. After 10 days, remove the mite catch tray and note if mite drop is low, medium or high, compared to your other hives. Scrape the catch tray clean and refit.

Check if the Apiguard tray has been emptied. If yes, fit second tray. Leave first tray in place, to remind you that you have fitted the second tray. If no, wait a further four days and then fit second tray.

Step 5. After two weeks, remove both Apiguard trays. Scrape any remaining Apiguard onto the top frames. Remove the eke and the mite catch tray. Clean and store for winter.

Step 6. Optional, same day as step 5. Fit a super of drawn combs, including any part-filled combs or combs wet from extracting, to store late season honey, balsam or ivy. No queen excluder needed.

Step 7. Remove entrance block and fit mouse guard.

Now you can go on holiday!

Compiled by Peter McFadden

Conwy BKA, 1st September 2009.