



## Things to do and see

Author Andy Willis - January 2009

Happy New Year!

A cold or mild and wet January is the best time to sit by the fire and read those bee books you got for Christmas presents. Not forgetting to attend those winter lectures that the association has booked for you as well (see 'Dates for your diary' in the [January Newsletter](#)). Education and learning have never been so important in beekeeping.

[Thornes](#) have an online sale in January (Starts on the 6<sup>th</sup>) and this is usually the cheapest place to buy foundation, if you don't have the beeswax to exchange.

Now is also a good time to start cleaning and preparing boxes for the coming spring. When cleaning boxes I use a sharp hive tool and stand the boxes on a plastic 'spot board' (normally used for mixing small quantities of concrete/mortar) available from most DIY stores. The propolis is very brittle with the cold at this time of year, and is easily scrapped off, being caught on the spot board for easy clearing up. The scrapped boxes are then scorched with a blow torch normally used for stripping paint. This is a very pleasant job on a bright, still winter's morning. The dry propolis scrapings are easily swept up with a dustpan and brush and are best disposed of on a bonfire in the garden (there may be diseases harbouring in this debris so don't leave out exposed to your bees) Also see '[Around and about the region](#)', Autumn/Winter 2008 for the alarming totals of disease in our area.

The cleaned scorched boxes can be fitted with frames, but don't fit the foundation until you need to use it later in the spring (it will keep fresher in the packets and be less brittle in the warmth of the spring) These prepared boxes can be left outside on a closed floor and using a spare roof to keep the rain/weather out.

Wax cappings and damaged/dirty comb can be rendered down using clean rain water (see [maximising and purifying your wax crop, the Andy method](#)) this will be in readiness for exchange for new foundation at your local suppliers or at Stoneleigh in April.

Tickets for Stoneleigh are available from the 10<sup>th</sup> January direct from the [BBKA](#) with limited numbers on the workshops (so book early). I have been asked to repeat my talk I did last year on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> April but also to do a more general talk/slide show on plants for bees on the Friday and repeated on Saturday. The Spring Convention continues to grow and get better every year. If you haven't been before, get there early (join the queue to get in) to get the most from the bargains on the Saturday sales day.

If you are new to beekeeping and have purchased new 'flat pack' equipment, now is a good time to assemble it. If you're not sure how to assemble, now is also a good time to ask a more experienced beekeeper for help (as they are not too busy at this time of year). The key to good beekeeping is to be prepared. There is

nothing more frustrating than having a swarm in a tree and your hive still requires cleaning or assembling. Bees do not wait, they have their own schedules and timetable and it's up to us to be ready for them.

Bees in the winter cluster, with no brood, still maintain a temperature of 25c. Once the queen returns to laying eggs (usually sometime in January in our area) the temperature in the hive goes up to 35c within the cluster. If we have a white hoar frost or some snow, this warmth within the hive will melt the ice, directly above the winter cluster on the outside of the roof. So a good sign to see on a cold winter's morning is damp patches in the middle of the roofs of hives in the apiary, surrounded by still frozen ice.

This heat is generated by the bees and the fuel is the honey stores within the hive. Once the Queen has resumed laying eggs, food consumption will increase. Hives will need to be checked to ensure they don't run short of food. This is normally done by hefting (gently lifting a hive off its stand to estimate its weight).

Hives will naturally get lighter as the winter goes on. Hives that feel extra light will need a visual check inside (to see if there are still frames of capped honey within easy reach of the winter cluster) These light hives may require feeding with fondant paced directly over the feed hole in the crown board (or directly on the top bars beneath an eke or empty super, if your crown board doesn't have feed holes). This is best done towards the end of January. It is generally accepted that sugar syrup is not good for bees in the middle of winter, as it is prone to ferment/go mouldy before the bees can either ripen it or use it, and can therefore lead to disease or upset tummies. Syrup also encourages the bees to fly (they think there is a honey flow on) Although within an urban area there are flowers, there is not enough in January for a honey flow, so most bees flying out excitedly because you are giving them syrup will return to the hive having wasted a lot of energy, shortening their lives in the process, with little or nothing to show for it.

Plants in flower this month visited by our bees include:

- Autumn/winter Cherry (*Prunus x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis')
- Various Mahonia species and hybrids
- Winter flowering shrubby honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima* and *Lonicera x purpussii*)
- *Viburnum tinus*
- Early rosemary
- Winter Heliotrope (*Petasites fragrans*)
- Winter Heathers (*Erica Carnea*)
- Tree Heather (*Erica lusitanica*)
- Christmas box (*Sarcococca*)
- Snowdrops
- Hellebores
- Gorse (*Ulex*)
- Early Hazel (Pollen only)
- Ornamental/Japanese Quince (*Chaenomeles*)
- Winter Aconite (*Eranthis Heymalis*)
- Lungwort (*Pulmonaria*)
- Early Mimosa (*Acacia baileyana*)
- Early Alder trees – pollen only

During mild spells pollen will be more obvious being brought into the hives, as this is required to feed the new brood being produced. A distinctive coloured one to look out for is the pollen from Snowdrops. It is a bright 'Jaffa' orange colour and usually collected in large loads.

The early signs of a good spring to come are already showing (see 'Signs of Spring' in the [January 09 newsletter](#)). Beekeepers that rely on oilseed rape for their spring honey may be disappointed though. This crop needs to be sown in August and the poor weather delayed harvest of previous crops in the fields, so the ground wasn't ready in time last year. As a result much less is being grown. Later spring sowings (which are better for our bees and give higher crops of honey) may still be sown, but I am reliably informed that farmers don't like growing it as they get a lower yield of oil from it. As a result more cereal crops will probably be sown instead. Us urban beekeepers will not be effected by this, other than an increased demand for our honey as there will be less produced nationally in the spring this year.

There is still time to treat with Oxalic acid (but only just) so check your varroa levels if you didn't have time last month.

CSL guidelines for January average Varroa mite daily drop

Level and Control Required	Average Mite Drop per Day	Proportion of Infested Drone Pupae
Low No Action	2 or less	
Medium Plan Action		
High Take Action	More than 2	