



Things to do and see

Author Andy Willis - January 2010

Happy New Year!

The recent seasonal cold weather at the end of December and start of January has made it difficult to apply oxalic acid. The application of the acid needs to be done when temperatures are 3°C or above in a brood free period.

Queens were continuing to lay up until the middle of December because of the unseasonal mild weather. 3 weeks of cold weather have now elapsed, so those last few eggs should now be completing their brood cycles giving us brood free colonies.

The days are now starting to lengthen and the bees will be aware of this. Queens normally start laying again this month, normally around the 12th January when day length increases noticeably.

This year this extra short brood free period has co-incided with a cold snap – too cold for oxalic acid application to be done. If your hives have high levels of Varroa then a successful oxalic acid treatment may not be possible.

Last year I trialled Mite Away II at the end of January and early February (max day temp was between +3°C and +10°C) and was most successful. So I can recommend this formic acid fume pad method of varroa control when oxalic acid has failed. For supply / more details see the [December 2009 newsletter article](#).

Cold weather does not kill bees, damp and starvation will. As brood rearing re-commences then food consumption within the hive will increase. If you have fed your hives enough during Sept/Oct then you have nothing to worry about. If you are in doubt now is the time to 'heft' your hives (gently lift the hive off its stand) to assess its weight. If it feels light and the bees are at the top of the frames near the crown board then they are short of food. You can feed a colony with fondant or candy put directly over the top bars of the hive, so the cluster has direct contact with the candy/fondant paste. Do not be tempted to use sugar syrup in a feeder. In 19 years of beekeeping I have never needed to use fondant. Feeding in the autumn is far better than emergency feeding now!

During a cold spell bees that come to the end of their lives tend to die in the hive. These in extreme circumstances can block the entrance particularly if you have the frames arranged the 'warm way' (parallel to the entrance), as opposed to the 'cold way' (at right angles to the entrance). You need to make sure the entrance remains clear to allow fresh air into the hive (solid floors only) and allow bees to go on cleansing flights on mild days (temp at 6°C or above). On Boxing day my bees were all out having cleansing flights last month. Under such circumstances it's common to find a number of dead bees thrown out in front of or near the hive.



Check the fronts of the hives for soiling and signs of dysentery. The bees sometimes get dysentery which is aggravated by long periods of hive confinement in bad/cold weather. Nosema will also show its hand with higher than normal bee mortality and can be associated with dysentery. There is nothing that can be done now but if you suspect Nosema or dysentery then if the colony survives until spring a spring feed of sugar syrup with Fumidil B followed by a shook swarm to remove the soiled combs should work. A sample of bees in a match box can be sent to the [National Bee Unit](#) and tested for Nosema at a cost of £10.

Smoker fuel can be stock piled for summer use now. I use hessian sacks/bags. This year Chinese sweet chestnuts have been arriving in our local greengrocers in small sacks – each one when rolled up will fill my smoker and should last a full week or more of inspections (20-30 individual hive inspections). The next source of sacking is Egyptian and Majorcan new potatoes which usually come in February and March. My local greengrocer puts all these hessian sacks by for me to collect as I'm a regular customer and they sell my honey.

Another source I have found is builders and builder's merchants like 'Jewson's'. You can buy a role or metres off a role of the hessian material from these builders' merchants. (It's sold as a blanket to put over new brick work / concrete to keep the frost off) If you know a builder or see some work being done you can often scrounge/ask for/get given some old but dirty hessian that has been used. Its best to wash and dry it first before use in the smoker as the dirt can increase the ash and affect its burning abilities. Unless you have money to burn, try to avoid buying smoker fuel especially from the beekeeping suppliers.

Peanuts and some other bird foods sometimes come in hessian sacks too. Ask around at various shops including pet shops/health food shops, it's amazing what will sometimes come to light when you just ask.

Have a careful look at the debris on the catch tray when monitoring for varroa. It can tell you a lot about what's going on inside the hive out of view. In a cold spell it will tell you the size of the winter cluster and how many seams of bees are in the cluster. This is by carefully looking for stripe patterns in the area of undisturbed debris. The majority of this debris will be chewed wax cappings as the bees slowly eat through their stores. Darker larger pieces of cappings will indicate the presence of hatching brood. Small white crystals will be pieces of chewed and dropped set honey (usually Ivy honey in our area).



Chalk brood also drop through the open mesh floor and can be either chalky white or grey/black.

After a mild day pieces of fresh pollen are sometimes dropped through the floor. Snowdrop pollen is a distinctive Jaffa orange colour and shows up well. Fresh pollen is an indicator that brood rearing has started again and that a queen is present.

Plants worked in mild weather in January (temp above 6°C) include:

Plant	Pollen Colour	Pollen	Nectar	Comments
Cherry (Autumn/Winter)		VV	V	
Christmas Box		VV	V	
Crocus species		VV		Nectar out of reach of honeybees
Gorse	Rich golden yellow	VV	V	
Hazel (Early)	Pale yellow/green	V		small pollen loads
Heather - Winter/Spring		VV	VV	
Heliotrope (winter)	White	VV	V	
Hellebores		VV	V	
Honeysuckle - Winter flowering shrubby		VV	VV	Best plant to have in the garden
Japonica (Ceanomeles or Japanese quince)		V	V	
Mahonia - Early		VV	VV	
Mimosa		VV	V	
Rosemary		V	VV	
Snowdrops	Jaffa Orange	VV	V	
Viburnum Tinus		V	V	
Winter Aconite		V	V	

Key

V: Okay
 VV: Good
 VVV: Very Good

Check list to do in January

- Check Varroa daily mite drops (require less than 1 per day)
- Treat with organic acids to control varroa (if needed)
- Keep an eye for vandals as hives are vulnerable in cold weather
- Heft hives and feed fondant directly on top bars of light hives.
- Keep entrances clear of debris including snow/dead bees
- Stack drawn comb in bee tight boxes outside to expose to frost (wax moth control).

Look out for:

- Signs of dysentery / staining on fronts of hives.
- Pollen going in at midday on mild days
- Some dead bees in front of hives.

- Fine sawdust like wax pieces on catch tray or in front of hives with solid floors
- Hessian sacking or other materials for smoker fuel
- Larger pieces of wax looking like nail clippings – (mouse damage)
- Wood Pecker damage to boxes (remove/repair as soon as possible)
- Cold dry sunny weather to clean and scorch spare boxes, floors and roofs
- Make up boxes and equipment for the coming season
- Order nucleus hives from your supplier – demand will be high
- Come along to the winter meetings and learn from the specialists and meet other beekeepers in your area.
- Snow or frost which melts first in the middle of the roof of the hive – this is a good sign and indicates a good number of live bees generating heat!



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