



Things to do and see

Author Andy Willis - February 2012

Having treated all my hives with oxalic acid at the end of December and early in January, varroa levels are now lower by at least half, which is not as good a treatment as I had hoped but significantly good enough to help and make it worthwhile doing. I have reliable reports of brood being found in all hives opened and given a limited quick inspection during mild weather over Christmas and the New Year. This would explain the less effective oxalic acid treatments as the hives do need to be brood free for best results.

All hives should now contain brood (even if they didn't before) as the days are lengthening and flowers becoming more numerous. All hives should also be getting lighter now. Any that are not getting lighter may have a queen problem or have died. These will need investigating as soon as the weather permits towards the end of February or next month. As the amounts of brood increase so does the demand for food. Stores will therefore be consumed faster as the month continues. Any very light hives discovered



Different sizes of contact feeders

when hefting will need feeding. Syrup can be used from mid-month onwards in mild weather if needed. If the weather should stay cold then fondant would be better. The spring syrup is dilute and made from 1 lb sugar dissolved in 1 pint of water. Little and often is better than a large amount which will go off. The important thing is to use a contact bucket feeder at this time of year as the whole cluster of bees will move up to the underside of the feeder and take the feed. If you have other types of feeder, in cold weather the bees will refuse to break the cluster to get to the syrup and may starve even though you have put food on.

If you have given your bees' extra top ventilation during the winter, to help prevent damp in the hive, this month is the time to remove it (i.e. match sticks under the corners of the crown board). If you wish to use extra insulation under the roof to keep the heat in this can be added now, if it's already in place it will require checking to make sure it's not damp. I have never used additional insulation or ventilation and have not had any problems.

Spring has started already. The first cherry plum blossom was seen out in Southampton in the last



Japonica flowers



week of January, crocus are coming out well (a good 4 weeks early) and the frogs are getting amorous in my pond. Mimosa is flowering well and early and the earliest willow is full out. Most of my colonies are showing great promise being larger and healthier than for many years at this time. Large numbers of bees have been flying on good days from all hives.

Having written the above, winter proper has arrived. This cold spell is both good and bad news.

The good news is that plants will be receiving the required hours of chilling (hours below 6°C) to break

dormancy properly when spring does arrive. Wax moth will be brought under control in stored boxes of drawn comb left outside exposed to frost.

The bad news is that prolonged cold weather restricts bee movement within the hive. Now that brood is present, the cluster of bees will not move away from it even to consume food/stores elsewhere within the hive. This causes isolation starvation as the bees are isolated from their food.

The beekeeper can do nothing about this, it is just bad luck. The longer the cold weather continues the greater the chances of this happening.

Things to Do

- Check varroa counts and compare with earlier counts (before oxalic acid treatment if used) ideally you are wanting less than 1 mite per day on average.
- Heft hives (all hives should be getting lighter now).
- Very light hives may require feeding.
- During a mild spell, mid month onwards. Dilute syrup can be used in a contact feeder. Use half a gallon at most at a time and check and remove/change if it goes mouldy, (1lb of sugar dissolved in 1 pint of water) fondant can be used in cold weather.
- Purchase sugar for spring/stimulative feeding for use at the end of the month or early next month.
- Heavy hives not using up stores may have a problem and may require investigation on warm sunny days towards the end of the month or early next month. If there are plenty of bees but no pollen coming in on good days or lack of flying bees compared with other hives it may have gone queen less.
- Clean by scraping with a hive tool and scorch with a blow torch the Spare boxes in readiness for the coming season. Pay particular attention to the corners and joints of the boxes and along the runners. Vaseline can be used on the cleaned runners to help prevent Propolis and make inspections easier when in use.
- Check stored comb, any that are damaged, mouldy or contaminated by mice should be melted down and exchanged for foundation.

Things to see

- Debris on the varroa board can tell you a lot about what's going on in the hive, i.e. how big the colony is, where the cluster is, where stores are being uncapped, hatching brood, wax moth/mouse damage. Dysentery can also be spotted early by seeing soiling, spots on the tray.



- Increasing activity on mild sunny days
- Increasing amounts of pollen coming in in good weather.
- Frost or snow melting first on hive rooves with no insulation (see picture on left)
- If the weather should turn cold, woodpeckers may become a problem so leave protection on at the moment, if used.

Plant	Pollen Colour	Pollen	Nectar	Comments
Alder	rusty orange	v		Flowering early this year
Almonds and Apricots		vv	vv	
Chaenomeles (Japanese Quince or Japonica)		v	v	First flowers already out on earliest plants
Cherry - Autumn/Winter (Prunus x subhirtella)		vv	V	Ornamental garden tree
Cherry Plum and Blackthorn		vv	vv	End of Month
Christmas Box (sarcococca)		v	v	Starts to flower at the end of December. Highly scented garden subshrub
Colts Foot		vv	v	Wild Flower
Crocus		vv		Nectar out of reach of honeybees
Crocus - Species		v		
Gorse	Rich golden yellow	v	v	Not much nectar but useful pollen all winter
Hazel	Pale yellow/green	v		Starts to flower at the end of December, no nectar as wind pollinated, small pollen loads.
Heather - Tree (Erica Lusitanica)		v	v	Honey scented European tree heather, much loved by bees
Heather - Winter/Spring (Erica carnea)		v	vv	Many coloured forms
Heliotrope (winter)	White	vv	v	Garden escape relative of our native coltsfoot - highly scented
Hellebores	Cream	vv	v	
Honeysuckle - Winter flowering shrubby		vv	v	Winter flowering, scented garden shrub

Key

V: Okay VV: Good VVV: Very Good

Plant	Pollen Colour	Pollen	Nectar	Comments
Japonica (Chaenomeles or Japanese quince)		v	v	Ornamental garden shrub
Lonicera fragrantissima or x purpusii		vv	vv	Garden Shrub just starting its long winter flowering - highly scented
Mahonia - species & hybrids		v	v	Flowering well this year
Mimosa		vv	v	
Prunus x subhirtella (Autumn Cherry)		vv	v	Ornamental garden tree
Rosemary		vv	vvv	
Snowdrops	Jaffa Orange	vv	v	
Viburnum Tinus		vv	v	Flowering early this year
Willow (Late)	Yellow	vvv	vvv	Pollen all over the bees
Winter Aconite		v	v	

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