

Patterson's Page

Lessons from the past winter

The past winter in Sussex has been fairly mild and in some ways similar to that of 2011–2012, but the bees have come through the 2012–2013 winter very differently. This winter many colonies were short of adult bees, because in August and September 2012 the adult populations reduced dramatically in some colonies. I have no evidence, but I suspect viruses were a major cause and I think losses will be high again this coming winter.

It is rather deflating for a new beekeeper to lose a colony. I normally advise beginners to get two colonies as soon as they can, so, if one dies or has a problem, it can be helped out with the other. Owing to the year-round problems these days I am starting to advise beekeepers to have a nucleus in addition to two full colonies;

that way they will have a spare queen during the summer if needed and possible winter losses can be prevented. Nuclei can be bolstered towards the end of the season to make them strong enough to go through the winter. If they survive and are not required, they can be given, or sold, to a beginner in the spring. The making of a nucleus need not deplete a full colony very much and may be a way of easing congestion in a strong colony that may otherwise build swarm cells.

Making increase and swarm control complement each other and I have recently given a whole day's tuition to my local BKA on these subjects, which went down very well. Local BKAs play a large part in the teaching of beekeeping, and as well as classroom tuition I place great importance on practical tuition. Teaching apiaries will soon be staging regular meetings and this is where the theory learned during the winter will be put into practice.

I urge all beekeepers to attend practical sessions as often as they can. As the saying goes, you have two ears, two eyes and one mouth. Use them in that ratio and you should learn well. Observation, logic and lateral thinking are important assets in beekeeping and there are many opportunities during the summer to use them. Look at the front of the hives before anyone goes near them; notice the ones that are different. When the hives are opened up you should find out why they differ. When you take the roof off have a look to see what is inside —spiders like it dry, wood lice like the damp. If the roof leaks, then look for the spot and mend it. Get a piece of propolis, roll it about in your warm hand until it is pliable and then smear it over the hole. Look under the floor to see if a swarm is under it, as can often happen with a clipped queen.

This article appeared in April 2013 BBKA News. It has been edited slightly by Roger Patterson to remove references to other pages and other issues.

Beekeeping associations are all different

I have long-held the view that all BKAs are different and long may that remain the case. They have different resources, whether it is personnel, finance or facilities. Consequently, they perform the same tasks differently. I recently attended the South West and South East Regional Training Co-ordinators Workshops, with a large number of beekeepers from different BKAs. The commonality was that they were all involved in training at a local level. Despite having largely the same teaching aids available they found a number of different ways to use them, or not, as was sometimes the case. There were certainly some differing views, and why not? As a BBKA Trustee I was there to help and support them, not to tell them what to do.

The teaching of beekeeping will always vary and so will the results achieved. We are dealing with amateur beekeepers who want to enjoy their hobby, with administration and teaching largely done by volunteers. They come from different locations, with different techniques needed and it is my view that a 'one size fits all' approach to teaching will not work.

What can you do differently this year?

I hope you have been to lectures, read books, leaflets and websites and come up with some different ideas. Can I suggest you look at a few new ideas that you may not have come across? If possible, I like to get brood combs drawn out in brood boxes used as supers (i.e. placed above the brood box) as the bees make a far better job of drawing them out. Very often foundation is put in the brood box when bees are not able to produce wax, which they do best when there is a nectar flow. This can result in poor combs. If a brood box, used as a super, is put on early in the season, especially in an oil seed rape area, the bees will draw it out and fill it with honey. Combs can be uncapped, extracted and used in the same season. These could be used for making nuclei or comb changing. I am surprised that many beekeepers do not think about producing cut-comb honey, but this is possibly because there is still the perception that it is difficult.

I think it is important to assess colonies every time they are inspected for temper and mobility on the combs. These affect both the handling and the time taken for inspections.

When you have a chance to re-queen a colony you can then use your hive records to help you make your choice of which colony to select queen cells from and which queens to cull.

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