

COMING OUT OF WINTER – TURNING “FEARFUL FEBRUARY” INTO A SUPER SEASON

If anyone were to ask, I would say that the month I fear most, from a beekeeping standpoint, is February. In Western Washington, February is the month that brings the freezing temperatures, and sometimes, snow. Yes, these events happen during other months. But in those months (November, December, January, March), there is usually a period of nicer weather, either before or after the event, that balances out the cycle. Not so in February. But, why the beekeeper stress?

Winter preparations should actually begin in the summer months. But it's Fall, when the kids go back to school, the temperatures start to drop, daylight savings is about to end, that the proverbial light bulb goes on for many that prepping the bee hives for winter needs to happen....NOW.

We do our very best to get the bees ready for winter by applying a fall mite treatment, leaving them with honey of their own making, applying extra winter feed (sugar bricks, etc.), and other preparations (hive wraps, mouse guards, etc., etc., etc.). The ideas and machinations we implement are almost too numerous to count. During the late fall and early winter, when we still get a few days of nice weather, we can indulge in our whim to check on the bees. No inspections mind you, but the pull to remove the lid and check on the girls to determine if our preparations were in vain or are working, is very strong.

Unfortunately, for many reasons, hives are lost at this time. Yellow jackets took their toll, mite treatments may have been applied too late or were ineffective, late loss of a queen, absconsion, etc. You don't keep bees for long without experiencing at least one of these. Those that have not, know beekeepers that have, and the anxiety starts to mount.

Enter February. The cold weather we see in the east finally cycles through and reaches us. We can no longer indulge in our whim to check on the girls as the threat of chilling is now too great. The anxiety continues to mount as we sit and watch our hives, knowing that some of us will continue to lose colonies.

So, what can we do? Now that the end of February is approaching and we're moving into March, we need to make preparations to help our survivor stock. The preparations will help decrease our stress because it's a PROACTIVE action, rather than a PASSIVE action. Instead of being idle in fear for our bees, we can fight for their survival, or for the betterment of the next installed colony.

Soon, the temperatures will reach a point where it's safe to briefly open the colonies, and I do mean *briefly*. The days are longer and, hopefully, the bees are rearing brood. You want everything you need to install ready and by your side so that you can be in and out in the shortest amount of time.

- The first item of business is making sure they have enough food. Whatever you are using (sugar brick, fondant, whatever), make sure you have some by your side. They will consume more, faster, now that brood rearing is under way. Add to the quantity even if they are not completely done with what they have (assuming, of course, that they are using it). Running completely out can set them back.
- Also, a brood patty. Because the weather will still be wet for some time, having a protein source will help the brood rearing process. Remember, if they can't fly, they can't collect new stores of pollen.
- Note: After you've taken care of the food, get your lids back on right away to minimize chilling. The rest can be done after the hive is safely closed back up.

- Check your entrances. You would have been doing this over the course of winter, but in March, some of the winter bees will start dying off. Sometimes, the winter bees dying can resemble a “crash” and the front entrance can get blocked, so check it often and try not to panic. As long as there is healthy young stock to take over the hive, they will make it.
- Moisture is another consideration. When checking on the food, if you notice that there is a great deal of moisture, then you need to change your ventilation. I won’t go into all the possibilities here, as there are many, but take note and make a change. If you don’t know what to do, ask your mentor or email me. By the way, a picture or description of your set up will be very helpful.
- Start the process to decide what you will use for a spring mite treatment. Many have temperature restrictions, and some will say not to put on honey supers for 30 days after a treatment is completed. Timing, therefore, can be critical. Think about the strength of your colony and what your plans are for adding supers. For example, a beekeeper wanting to catch the maple flow is not going to use a treatment unfit for honey supers, there simply won’t be enough time. So start the planning process now, so mite treatment choice is appropriate.

For those that have already lost colonies, I can hear your thoughts...“Yea, it would be nice if my bees were still alive so I could do all this stuff.” And I completely understand, but you have jobs, too:

- First, I should say that if your bees were alive in January, but you’re not seeing them fly now, DO NOT be in a rush to open your hive! A colony that has dwindled down to its smallest survivable quantity might not be flying on a sunny day. Checking on the food supply (quickly) is one thing. But if in thinking the colony is dead you start dismantling the hive and then find them in the middle somewhere...that degree of chilling will most certainly mean their demise.
- Having said that, wait until the weather is better to dismantle a lost colony. If the colony is truly gone, you need to try and determine why they were lost. Take pictures of all the frames, particularly any frames where the bees died in cluster. Also, the bottom board. Show those frames to your mentor and get help (if not evident to you) with possible answers. This is an important step as it could mean a change to your winter set up next year.
- Clean up any equipment that needs it.
- I’m not in favor of keeping comb where bees have died in it. I’ve gotten very conservative in this area and if there is any chance that a pathogen was involved, it is a far better idea, in my not-always-so-humble-opinion, to replace the foundation than to risk contaminating your new group of bees. One or two bees, okay. But an entire patch – yuk. Remove the foundation, scrape down the frame, run it through a bleach solution (some folks use lye – your choice), dry and replace the foundation.

Making plans and performing these actions will have a positive effect on our attitude at a time when we may be feeling a bit helpless. We know that the bees can surprise is in a number of ways, so preparation is everything!

Spring is coming, and with it, a new and exciting beekeeping season! Have a wonderful year, everyone!