

The Brush Off

By Don Honey, Newbury and District BKA

How much is honey worth? Do you know the true value of this wonderful product our bees give us?

In monetary terms, I charge £4 for a half pound jar (227g). Some might think that a bit expensive, others might not. Suffice to say that I put a lot of effort into making my honey look both attractive in its packaging as well as the product being suitably clear of debris and fit for purpose. It seems to me to be appropriate considering the effort both my bees and I go to, and it seems to be appreciated by my customers. But the real question is not the monetary one, but how much is honey worth to our bees.

Life sustaining

You don't need to be brain of Britain to work out that honey bees make honey to survive. They make the stuff so that each year the colony can get through the cold winter months while food is not available, and even if it were, it would be too cold for them to get it. If their system of storing it wasn't up to scratch, then we would not be here today as beekeepers, because there would be no bees. So the answer is that the value of honey to our bees is "priceless".

Is it greed or just ignorance?

So when we take our honey reward for keeping our bees, do we know the real price we are paying when taking it from them? Will we leave enough for our precious bees to survive the winter? Will we be happy at how much we have extracted, or disappointed that there wasn't more. It's clear to me that honey bees do have a limited choice of diet. They've never buzzed around my sandwiches or sticky buns when I am having afternoon tea in the garden. Never attacked the sugar bowl while having a nice pot of tea. They are just happy as Larry flitting from one flower to another doing that wonderful thing of



just pollinating our flowers and crops. And it's a blooming good job they do, because without them our choice of food stuffs would be seriously limited.

No need to panic

So having taken our honey, jarred it, sold it, given it away to family and friends, and put the rest in the back of the cupboard for Christmas pressies, we think perhaps we should feed our bees in case they starve! That's ok, because sugar is just 63p per kilo as opposed to my £16 per kilo for honey. It makes pure economic sense to sweeten them up with cane sugar from across the world, or even our home grown sugar beet. You might pick up a whiff of sarcasm in what I say.

Think first

I am sure there is nothing worse for a true lover of bees finding that their hive is full of corpses in the spring, due possibly to starvation. And I have no problem in advising to feed our bees with whatever it takes should there be any doubt about their level of stores. Far better to be safe than sorry. But has enough thought been put into the issue of future stores before extraction? I know those silly bees harvest rape early in the year and some bring home ivy at the back end of the year, both of which must be taken off before it crystallises. There is no easy answer. I certainly think that there are a multitude of factors to consider when keeping bees, and the local forage must rank very high.

Ask the question

You may wish to "Brush this question away" and think so what. Or should we now start printing on our honey jar labels "WITH ADDED SUGAR". It is well documented that bees will move stores from one part of the comb to another, even if it is made from a sugar solution or nectar. So next year's crop may well contain your "feedings". Personally I would like to see it labelled PURE HONEY with NO ADDED SUGAR.

True value

Just a handful of jars of your own home grown honey should satisfy the appetite for the hobby beekeeper. Once you've invested in the hive, suit, and dare I say it, the "smoker", your future bounty is free. And if, like me, you consistently get 100lbs per hive each year, then surely the Gods are looking over us. The photo I have used to illustrate my article is me brushing off my girls from a super frame. With having anything from three to five hives each year, I am able to take off batches of nine frames at a time. This suits me and my 9 frame extractor, and doesn't reduce the levels of stores substantially in any one hive. Because of this low level of extraction, I am able to use the "Brush and Run" technique. No need for a smoker. It's a bit like keeping the lawn trimmed, little and often!

There is no one correct answer. Enjoy your honey.