

Keeping Honeybees in Southside Virginia

An Annual Calendar of Activities

This calendar is only a suggested checklist of events in the beekeeper's year. Weather conditions, hive locations, and the type of bees you have can and will influence your activities throughout the year. This list is meant as an overview of what's taking place in the hive each month. It also makes suggestions on various tasks the beekeeper should be doing in that month. If you are unsure about what you see in your hives, contact the bee club or your mentor before you do anything.

January

The Bees

This month the queen is surrounded by thousands of her workers. She is in the midst of their winter cluster. There is little activity for the bees this month except maybe on a warm day (about 45-50 degrees) when the workers will take the opportunity to make cleansing flights.

The Beekeeper

Often this is a quiet month for the beekeeper. If there is a heavy snow, make certain the entrance to the hive is cleared to allow for proper ventilation. This is a great time to catch up on your reading about the latest buzz. Don't forget to attend your next club meeting and start building and repairing the equipment you might need for this coming season. Go ahead and order that package of bees, if needed, from a reputable supplier.

February

The Bees

Early in the month, the queen is still cozy in the cluster. Workers will take cleansing flights on mild days.

The Beekeeper

On a warm day that is not windy, lift the top a little to take a quick peak at the candy board or honey stores. Look for signs of a hive in trouble. Gently tilt the hive by lifting the back of the hive to estimate the amount of honey the hive has still has available for the rest of the season. If the hive is very light, it may be necessary to begin feeding. Continue to get your equipment ready. Attend your club meeting.

March

The Bees

The maple bloom begins around the middle of the month in Southside Virginia, and the beekeeper must make sure the hive is ready for it. The queen will begin laying as soon as fresh pollen starts coming into the hive. With the days becoming longer, the queen steadily increases her rate of egg laying. More brood means more food will be consumed. The bees will continue to consume honey stores. They will also bring in a fair amount of pollen in during this month. More colonies are lost this time of year than during all of the other winter months.

The Beekeeper

On a nice sunny day at the beginning of the month, when there is no wind and the bees are flying, have a quick look inside your hive. Any temperature above 65 degrees should be fine for a short period of time. If the temperatures are cooperating there should not be any problem removing the frames for a quick inspection. You should see cells with new nectar, pollen, brood both capped and uncapped, and eggs. You may even get lucky and see the queen herself. Do not waste time looking for the queen if you have found new brood and eggs. **If you find these, a queen is present.**

April

The Bees

The weather is starting to improve, and the early blossoms are beginning to appear. The bees are continuing to bring pollen into the hive. The queen is laying eggs, and the population is growing fast. Inspect for disease and see that the queen is laying. Colony populations are high in preparation of the coming flow, but food stores can run dangerously low until the flow starts. When the night temperatures average 55 degrees, remove the entrance reducers. Remove up to three old brood frames in each hive body and replace them with ones having new wax foundation.

The Beekeeper

This is a critical month for Southside Virginia beekeepers. On a warm and still day, do a complete inspection of the hive. Look for any evidence of the queen even if you do not take the time to find her. Are there plenty of eggs and brood both capped and uncapped? Is there a nice pattern to her egg laying? Can you find any evidence of the queen? Are there plenty of eggs and brood? Is there a nice pattern to her egg laying? Around the third or fourth week of the month place honey supers on top of the hive bodies housing your colony. Package bees should be installed as early as possible this month to take advantage of the poplar flow. Watch out for swarming. Attend your local club meeting for support.

May

The Bees

Now the hive is really buzzing. Nectar and pollen should begin to come into the hive fast and furiously. There may be congestion on the front entrances to your hives. This is the peak of the egg laying season for the queen. The combs in the central part of the hive should have good, solid patterns of capped brood. The hive should be bursting with busy buzzing bees.

The Beekeeper

Inspect the hive's honey supers weekly to stay ahead of the flow. Add additional supers if needed. Attend your bee club meetings and any workshops you can find. Swarming may occur this month.

June

The Bees

Hives that haven't swarmed will be boiling with bees. The queen's rate of egg laying may drop a little bit late this month.

The Beekeeper

Continue to inspect the honey supers weekly. Supers full of poplar honey may be removed. It is getting late in the season, so this may be the last time you should split a colony in Southside Virginia. Check to determine if more honey supers need to be added, but do not add too many too soon. Keep watching for swarming which may still occur. Keep your nucs and swarm catching hives ready.

July

The Bees

On hot and humid nights, you may see a huge curtain of bees cooling themselves on the exterior of the hive. Most major nectar resources in Southside Virginia are beginning to wind down. You may find some sourwood trees still blooming, but most other major sources have dried up. Pollen may still be available.

The Beekeeper

June and July are harvest months for the Southside Virginia. Continue inspections to the hive to make sure your hive is healthy. Remember to leave at least 40 pounds of honey for the hive to get through the winter. Consider feeding 1:1 syrup to weak hives. Check on the queen. Plan and start mite treatment. It's a good idea to get some advice on "alternating medications" to keep pests from developing immunity to them.

August

The Bees

The colony's growth is slowing down. Drones are still around, but the workers will soon lose interest in feeding them. The outside activity is beginning to slow down. Pollen is still available.

The Beekeeper

There is not much chance of swarming this month. Watch out for honey robbing by wasps or other bees. Consider feeding 1:1 syrup to weak hives. You may also want to consider a pollen substitute. Each hive should have at least forty pounds of honey and stores going into the winter. Check this by lifting up the back of the hive to ascertain its weight. Check on the queen by finding her or finding signs that she is present, i.e., find eggs and new brood.

September

The Bees

The hive population is dropping. The queen's egg laying is significantly reduced, and the drones may begin to disappear this month. There should still be significant activity at the front entrances to the hives. There should no longer be any drones flying from the hives.

The Beekeeper

Feeding continues until the bees will take no more syrup. It is time to do the fall inspection to evaluate the hive's resources. Make needed adjustments including combining two weak colonies to make one stronger colony that has a better chance of surviving the winter. The simplest way to do this is to use the newspaper trick. Attend your bee club meetings.

October

The Bees

Not much activity going on in the hive now. The bees are settling down for the winter.

The Beekeeper

It is time for a final inspection before winter. On a warm day, check to see if your previous adjustments have been effective. Finish feeding for the winter. This is the last good month to combine weak hives if you discover any. It's better to take losses in the fall than to wait and discover a loss in the spring.

November

The Bees

The cold weather will send the bees into a cluster to keep the queen and any brood warm. There will not be much activity at the front entrances of your hives.

The Beekeeper

There is even less to do in the hive this month. It will probably be too cold to open the hives in Southside Virginia. It's time to add an entrance reducer to the hive to keep field mice from nesting inside. Store your not needed equipment away for the winter. Be careful that all frames from which honey had been extracted have been cleaned by the bees before storing away. Be especially careful when storing frames that also held brood and pollen, for these frames attract and harbor wax moths and other pests. After these types of frames have been cleaned by the bees, consider placing them in a freezer for several days before storing them away. Let them air out and come to room temperature before sealing them in heavy plastic bags for the winter. Do not store them damp. Continue to attend your bee club meetings.

December

The Bees

The bees are in a tight cluster now.

The Beekeeper

There is nothing you can do with the bees this month. No peeking. Opening the hive this month could injure your girls. Read a good book on beekeeping, study the latest reports on their health.

Be thinking about what worked well for you this season and what, if anything, you might want to change next year. Enjoy the holidays, and spend some quality time with your friends and family.

Credits:

North Carolina Piedmont Beekeepers: for the use of their format.

Heart of Virginia Beekeepers: Pat Barber, Bill Morgan, Donnie Amos, David Richmond, Tommy Nelson