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INTRODUCTION

When I first started beekeeping, I spent a lot of time perusing various sources of information about beekeeping. I read books, combed the internet and went to tons of Richmond beekeeping association meetings in the Richmond, Va area. It has been said, of me, on many occasions, that I become obsessive when I take an interest in something. Beekeeping was no exception. To this day, I continue to seek out ways to learn more about beekeeping and it has really paid off in a honey bee hive survival rate that far exceeds the national average.

Today, I have enough hives that I can afford to experiment with various ideas to see what really works for our area. Losing a hive or two is not nearly as painful when you have 68 hives (which I do now), as compared to 2 hives (what I had when I started.) The ability to tolerate this risk allows me to compare various strategies and executing different tactics for each hive. I have learned a lot over the years, discovering that some of the tried and true methods really do not work, whereas some things that are left unsaid in our area can do a lot to help out the bees.

For the past couple of years, I have wanted a venue to disperse some of the information to other beekeepers in central Virginia. Although a lot of my experiences and misadventures are recorded on my blog (<http://richmondhoneybee.com/>) , that is not the right channel for monthly and/or bi-monthly informational messages. Therefore, I started this newsletter!

Things are likely to be slim at first, but I expect it to mature as time marches on.

GENERAL MUSINGS ON SUSTAINABLE BEEKEEPING

In my neck of the woods, just to the east of Richmond, Virginia, it's been a fairly typical Winter thus far. I would guess that the average temperatures are a bit higher than normal, but it is a far cry from the warm Winter that we had last year. As a beekeeper, this month (Feb) and the next month (Mar) are the real danger months for bees. So, we are definitely not out of the woods yet!

The primary preventable risk is starvation. It happened to me once and I tried to make sure that it never happens again. Right now (I actually did this two weeks ago), you have to wait for a day when the weather creeps above 50¹ and run check your hive. This is not 'pull the frames and look at the

¹ I've done these inspections in the low-40's and would probably do them in the 30's if that were my only option. Ideally, you want to do them in the 50's, but do not let that 'rule' prevent you from doing it in the first place

bees' – you are simply taking the inner cover off and pulling a frame or two, from the outside edges of the hive. You're simply doing a 'honey stores check', so it is also helpful to pick up on the back of the hive to get a feel for the weight. Ideally, in mid-Jan, your bees are still clustering in the bottom brood box and only a few have come up onto the capped honey above. But, my bees never operate in the ideal scenarios. The key is to understand, at a high level, how much honey is left to get them through to mid- or late-March. Only rarely have I encountered a real problem. For the vast majority of my hives, I record a little checkbox in my inspection journal that says 'No Need to Check Again, Until Drone Walking Time'. For a very few, I note that I should come back in a month to double-check. For the rare hive that appears to be nearly out, I make a decision as to whether I will let them try to go it on their own (and probably perish) or feed them.

I will address the 'feed them' issue below. But, the question of whether I simply step back and leave them alone or not is a really big one. Sustainable Beekeeping demands a fairly harsh attitude from the beekeeper. You have to understand that a colony, which is unable to make it on its own, must be allowed to perish. You simply do not want to encourage those genes into the next year, as hard as it may be to swallow. The one caveat to this rule centers on *time as a beekeeper* (you should not let a hive die, regardless, if this is your first or second Winter) and *number of hives* (the more hives you have, the more willing you should be to let your hives perish without intervention.)

There is a final reason why, in the case of honey stores, you might feed them – because their lack of honey is your fault. You took it from them last year. In my opinion, if you harvest honey from the hive you have an obligation to make sure that you leave them with enough to make it through the Winter. It would be a real tragedy to have a genetically strong colony, who stashed a lot of honey away, to die because the beekeeper took too much of it.

Finally, if you are in one of the camps above, that is forced to utilize the methodology below (for feeding) and it was not because you took too much honey, you still have options to keep your honey bees strong. It is true that, because you may be feeding an otherwise weak line of bees, you are potentially dealing the honey bees in your area a blow by keeping them alive. But, sometimes it cannot be helped. To mitigate this risk, you should absolutely mark the hive for requeening in May (best time to naturally requeen in our area.) By 'requeening', you will need to go into your hive, find the queen and pinch her head (kill her.) In this way, you will have removed the primary origin of the 'poor genes' and let the bees incorporate some of the wild genetics from the nearby colonies. Hopefully, you'll end up with the next super Honey Bee!

WINTER FEEDING

When I first heard of someone talking about 'feeding bees', all sorts of things came to my mind. I grew up in the country and was very familiar with feeding cows, chickens, pigs, dogs and cats. But, feeding an insect? The very thought of it made me guffaw. Well, as I have learned, it is a very common practice among beekeepers. But, *How* you do it depends on the month of the year (or, really the Season of the year.)

In January (and February), you will utilize Winter feeding strategies if you decide that your bees need honey. The number one Winter feeding strategy is to put capped frames of honey onto or into your hives. Ideally, you either have capped supers on some of your stronger hives from last year that they can spare (these are **Bank Hives**, which I will chat about later,) or you have a few supers of capped, unharvested honey in a secure location that you can get to. Although I am not aware of

any scientific evidence to support this, I am absolutely certain that bees fed 'sugar' or 'sugar water' do not have the same advantages as the honey bees that eat nectar-based honey throughout the year. So, honey is the number one mission here.

I can hear the exclamations now (only because I've been there!) How can I have honey? It's my first/second Winter and I've been very frugal in taking my bees stores! Fortunately, having honey available to feed your bees is only a bonus, not a must have. A quick trip to the store to pick up a few bags of sugar will work and get your bees to Spring.

Using sugar in the Winter is different from other times of the year. The first difference is that you do not mix it with water to create a syrup. Moisture in the hive, during Winter, can be a real challenge to the bees. So, you need to keep the sugar in its dry, raw form. The best method, in my opinion, is to use the Mountain Camp method. This involves a spacer, some sugar, a sheet of newspaper and a light misting of water.

You're going to place the sugar on top of the top bars of your frames. To do this efficiently, you'll need a 'spacer.' You can build or purchase one. It is basically the exact dimensions of a hive body, but only 2 or 3 inches tall. I take old hive bodies that might have a bit of rot on them and cut them up into 3 to 5 spacers (after cutting off the rot.) But, you could just as easily build them. The spacer goes between the top hive body and the inner cover.

Once you have your equipment, start in the kitchen and put your sugar (start off with a 5 lbs bag) into a bowl and spray it lightly with water. You do not want a sopping wet mass of sugar. You just want something that will clump together a bit. It is important to have a little dampness to assist the bees in eating it (they won't eat completely draw sugar - they'll remove it from the hive, thinking it is trash.) Once you have your bowl of lightly damp sugar, it's time to head to the bee yard.

Place your spacer above the top hive body. Lay a single layer of newspaper on top of the top bars (leave some openings along the sides) and spread your sugar out on the paper. It might get to a couple of inches thick in the center. Put your inner cover on top of the spacer and then put your outer cover on. Voila, you now have put what beekeepers call 'emergency feed' on your bees. It's not ideal, but it should get them through to the first real nectar sources (holly and maple), where they'll take off on their own. An added bonus of the Mountain Camp method is that the sugar will absorb some of the natural moisture that the colony puts off in the Winter (another reason why you do not want to wet your sugar TOO much.) As mentioned, moisture in the hive during the Winter is tough on the colony.

NEW BEEKEEPER CORNER

If this will be your first year as a Beekeeper, you probably have a lot on your mind! In 2 to 4 months, you'll have your hives (you should be starting with two) up and going, enjoying your first adventures (or misadventures if you're like me!) with honey bees. You have three tasks that you should be focusing on in early February:

1. Your bees - make sure you have ordered your bees,
2. Your equipment - You should be thinking about what equipment you'll be purchasing and from where you'll get it, and
3. Reading - you should definitely have a book or three that you are reading on beekeeping.

Since all of these are a topic to themselves, your best bet is to make sure you go to one of the February beekeeping meetings in Richmond (visitors are welcome at all of the Beekeeping Associations) and review your strategy and plan with an experienced beekeeper.

Thoughts from the Master Beekeeper

As cold as it is, it can be hard to believe that there is a very good chance that the queen will actually be laying drone eggs sometime over the next 4 weeks. This is a huge ordeal, as it signifies the beginning of the Nuc and Split making season. Now is the time to make sure you have your Nucs ready and begin to think about the weather. In a normal Winter (is there such a thing!?!?), we will see walking Drones in early March. If things are a bit warmer, we can see them in mid-February, or if things are a bit cooler, it can happen much later.

What does 'walking drones' mean? That will be a discussion for the next newsletter!