

NOVEMBER

November is a quiet month in the apiary: as the days shorten, activity within the hive lessens as forage is scarce. If the weather is benign there is perhaps a little pollen from late-flowering plants such as Michaelmas daisy and ivy but hardly any nectar. Because of this reduced activity the lifespan of the workers increases dramatically. Most of these autumn bees will survive until early spring, ready to take up their duties when the colony begins to expand.

Since our bees do not hibernate but simply slow down their metabolism, they require food in order to survive and to provide the energy needed to regulate the temperature and airflow within and around the winter cluster. In mild weather the cluster expands and the bees fan their wings to cool and ventilate the hive: in cold weather the cluster contracts and the bees vibrate their powerful flight muscles to generate heat. All of this activity requires energy and this comes from the food stores that the colony has built up, supplemented of course by the beekeeper if a late honey crop has been removed. It is vital, therefore, that each colony has sufficient stores to see it through the winter season and that these stores are close enough to the winter cluster for the bees to access if the weather becomes very cold. It is too late now to feed home-made sugar syrup as the bees are not active enough to process it for safe storage; they must convert the majority of the sucrose into glucose and fructose, which is much easier to digest, and to remove excess water. Unprocessed syrup may ferment and lead to dysentery, but this will be avoided if you use a commercially produced, ready inverted syrup such as Ambrosia or a fondant-type product.

Keep hefting or weighing and regularly check the varroa floor inserts for signs of uncapping of stores – this will give you an impression of how quickly the colony is consuming stores and help you locate the cluster. After a prolonged cold spell it may be advisable to quickly open the hive to check that the bees have not become isolated from their stores and, if that is the case, to move combs of food right up against the cluster. If the bees are at the top of the frames with no food above them, place some fondant, candy or damp sugar bags over the feed holes in the crownboard: you will need an eke or empty super to give space, which can be filled with quilting or some other form of insulation such as a carpet square or bubble wrap. Running out of food shouldn't really happen in November or December if the bees have been properly fed, but accidents can happen and a really quick check should do no harm. You have, of course, removed the queen excluder? The bees will not go through it to access fresh stores if it means leaving the queen behind and they will almost certainly starve.

As you carry out your essential apiary management – anchoring hives, weeding and brush clearing, general tidying – keep an eye out for any evidence of the presence of Asian hornets. Look out for signs of old nests in trees and hedges, possibly but not always high up, ejected dead larvae or dead worker/drone adults on the ground below. Any new queens that may have emerged from unseen nests will be looking for a good place to hibernate for the winter: check sheds, garages and leaf litter.

November Summary

Check that your hives remain secure against predators, weather and flooding, and look out for evidence of water ingress through roofs and corners.

Check your hives for damage after strong winds and adverse weather.

Consider insulation on hives in exposed positions and insulate all deep roofs.

Check that hive entrances are clear of debris, dead bees, snow, etc.

Cut back grass and foliage under and around your hives to reduce dampness.

Keep varroa floor inserts clear of debris that may allow wax moth to breed.

Continue to monitor varroa drop and plan further treatment if needed, e.g. oxalic acid.

Complete cleaning, repairing, sterilising and storing your equipment.

Check that your valuable stock of stored comb is well protected against damp, mice and wax moth.

De-coke your smoker, clean your hive tools, wash your bee suit.

Complete your colony records and your varroa treatment record card.

Continue to evaluate your beekeeping season and make plans for the new one.

Read or re-read those beekeeping books and maybe enrol on a course.

Melt down and clean all those bits of wax and make candles, hand cream, soap.

Check out any attractive hibernation places for Asian hornet queens and look out for old nests.

If you haven't already done so, remove queen excluders.