

MARCH

Traditionally March is the month in which the apiary comes to life and the active season begins. On warmer days we will see bees flying and taking in pollen from early spring plants such as snowdrop, aconite, mahonia, grape hyacinth, hellebore, and from hazel, alder and willow catkins. Our queens will have been laying for some time and that laying rate will increase further if the weather is typically spring-like. Increased activity inside and outside the hive means a higher consumption of stores and if there is very little forage around, there is danger of starvation. More colonies starve in March than at any other time of year. Therefore, continue to check stores by hefting – a colony should have at least 12lbs (6kg) of stores at any time of year – and feed if necessary. If the weather is cold and bees aren't flying freely, feed candy or fondant: cut away the plastic on the bottom of the packet and place the pack over the feed holes in the crown board – you may need to use an eke or empty super to make space under the roof but you can use some insulating material to fill the extra space. If you think your bees are starving you can place the block directly on top of the frames above the bees – use an eke or empty super to create space under the crown board.

If the weather is warm and the bees are active and flying freely, feed 1:1 syrup in a contact feeder: you can also feed an invert sugar syrup like Ambrosia. Don't be too quick to feed syrup: the weather must be warm enough for the bees to make cleansing flights and there is also the risk of syrup being stored in the brood frames, reducing space for the queen to lay. Take care not to spill syrup in your apiary – take a bucket to invert the feeder over to catch the drips until the vacuum has been formed above the syrup.

Once you start feeding you must keep it up until there is sufficient forage to sustain the colony – bees can starve in a surprisingly short period of time. If the bees are confined to the hive in a sustained spell of bad weather, you may also want to feed some pollen substitute, e.g. Nektapol. The point of feeding is not only to keep your bees alive but also to help the colony build up ahead of the nectar flow: eggs laid mid-March will become May's foragers.

March Summary

Check stores and feed if necessary.

Change floors if you haven't already done so: move the hive to one side, replace the old floor with a clean one and lift the hive back in position. With your nice clean floor insert you can now begin varroa monitoring again.

Remove mouse guards and woodpecker protection.

Carry out your first inspection if the weather is warm enough, minimum 14C the appearance of blossom on flowering currant is the traditional sign that the weather is warm enough but use a cover cloth to avoid chilling the bees. No need to go through every frame – as soon as you've seen a regular brood pattern, some stores and that the bees seem happy, close up.

Prepare clean brood frames/make up new brood frames – you will need these to hand to replace dirty and damaged comb when you make your full inspections in the warmer weather.

Prepare supers & queen excluders.

Complete all your equipment repairs & cleaning.

Check spare hives, frames & foundation – the active season's about to start! Take advantage of events and auctions to stock up at affordable prices.

Think about providing a water source close to your hives, e.g. pond, gravel tray.

If you haven't already done so, start your new season record sheets.

Put out Asian Hornet monitoring traps and check them regularly: register on BeeBase.