

MAY

May is usually a delightful month for beekeeping, with orchards, hedgerows, and gardens in full bloom and some very welcome long warm days. In those areas where there is a spring flow the honey will be ripening in the supers and our hives will be full of bees – it's swarming time! The very thought often fills the novice beekeeper with dread but there's no need, swarming is what honey bees do and we need to understand why they do it and how to handle it.

Why bees swarm. It's the honey bee colony's natural way of replication and without this process honey bees would have died out many years ago. The queen produces 'queen substance' (a set of pheromones) from her mandibular glands which is taken up by the worker bees and passed around the colony. All worker bees need to receive a minimum level: this communicates to the bees that they are 'queen-right' and it is a stimulus for foraging and other activities within the hive. If the colony is overcrowded, then not only may the queen not have sufficient space to lay, but her pheromones may not reach all the bees in the required quantities – leading to swarming preparations. You will see drones present, or at least drone brood, and the bees will begin to build little acorn-shaped queen cups (play cups) around the edges of the comb. Keep an eye on those queen cups – when they have a rim of new white wax you can be sure that preparations for swarming are afoot.

So what can you do about it? We can manage the impulse to swarm by keeping young queens. It is thought that a young queen will produce larger amounts of queen substance than an older queen. We can ensure that the bees have enough room by supering early. Nectar takes up a lot more space than honey because the bees spread it out to evaporate the water and ripen it so add another super when the last one is full of bees, not honey. Make sure that the colony has plenty of ventilation as this ensures that the queen substance can be distributed easily: it also helps in the ripening of nectar. Repeatedly destroying queen cells will demoralise the bees and will not delay the swarming process for long once the colony has started making preparations. Plus, bees are very good at hiding a cell or two! Work with your bees to your mutual advantage – practise swarm control by performing an artificial swarm or making up a nuc or two. Read up on it or ask for help – this month's *Beecraft* has an excellent article for beginners.

Be on the look-out for Asian hornet queens. We don't know if there were any Asian hornet queens over-wintering in the UK this year, but any that have survived will now be out and about searching for sugary foods to build up their energy: look for them on flowers such as camellias and around trees that ooze sap. These queens will also be constructing embryo primary nests, very similar in appearance to wasps' nests, so look for the first signs in sheltered spots like sheds and porches. The continuing COVID-19 lockdown, although irksome, allows us to extend our vigilance as we will be spending more time in our gardens and apiaries and on walks around our neighbourhood.

May Summary

If you have not already done an artificial swarm, continue 7-day inspections for occupied queen cells and take swarm control measures immediately if necessary.

Add supers ahead of the bees' requirements, i.e. when a super is full of bees, not full of honey. Remember: space for bees and space for nectar!

Remove 'ripe' oilseed rape honey: give super frames with unsealed honey cells a firm shake and if nectar flies out, leave it a little longer – it will ferment if the water content is too high.

Order your nucleus if this is how you want to start your beekeeping.

Book the loan of a honey extractor from NBKA or arrange with a fellow beekeeper to use or borrow theirs.

Maintain vigilance for Asian hornets. Check traps regularly and release non-target insects (they will not drown if you put a piece of foam or crumpled kitchen roll in the bait reservoir) and look out for possible primary nests.