

OCTOBER

October is a month of transition: as the days grow shorter and cooler there is less forage for our bees and activity within the hives begins to slow. The foragers will still be working the ivy and late garden flowers to add to vital winter stores – any pollen going in now will be for storing rather than feeding to brood as the queens have greatly reduced their laying rate. The colony is still large but as there are more bees to do less work, each individual bee is able to live longer. The house bees will still consume large quantities of pollen but, instead of metabolising this to brood food, will store it in their fat bodies as a food reserve that will ensure that they live through to the spring and will be ready to feed the new larvae and forage for fresh pollen and nectar.

The survival of the winter bees depends as much on the beekeeper as on the natural order: our colonies need to be strong, well-provisioned and free from disease. If we have carried out our September tasks efficiently and have fed, medicated and possibly united colonies then we can begin to relax a little and look forward to a quiet spell before next spring.

After the security of the colony comes the security of the hive: we need to protect against physical dangers. In windy areas or where there are livestock it may be necessary to rope down hives or put a hefty brick on top of the roof. A hive full of tasty bees and honey can attract badgers and woodpeckers and mice will find the well-provisioned and warm environment an ideal place to hibernate if they can get in. Green woodpeckers can wreak havoc with your hives, drilling through wood and polystyrene to get at the tasty larvae and honey inside: a framework of chicken wire or curtain of plastic strips fastened to the hive will prevent the birds finding a firm foothold.

If your hive entrances are deeper than 8mm you will need to fit mouse guards: perforated metal or plastic strips that allow bees in but keep out small rodents looking for a cosy and well-provisioned place to hibernate. Fitted too soon they can dislodge the painstakingly collected pollen loads from the corbiculae of returning foragers, so use your judgement. Sugar syrup feeding and varroa treatments should be completed by the end of the month and any poor woodwork or leaking roofs remedied.

Although winter is approaching there must be no let-up in our vigilance for the Asian hornet: workers could still be hawking around our hives and new queens may emerge to feed on carbohydrate-rich foods prior to hibernation and will be attracted to fallen fruit, ivy and other late sources of nectar. Baits now should be sugar rich (but not honey), changed frequently and monitored daily. As the leaves fall look up into trees for signs of nests revealed and report any sightings.

October Summary

Continue feeding if necessary if the colony has not started to form its winter cluster, use fondant if the weather is cold.

Fit mouseguards or entrance blocks with a low opening – no more than 8mm – and check regularly that entrances are clear.

Fit wire netting or plastic strips around the hive to deter woodpeckers.

Ensure that woodwork is sound and that hives are clear of the ground to avoid dampness; clear away encroaching vegetation.

Store extracted comb securely, treated against wax moth (use Certan, if available, or put in the freezer for a while).

Clean & sterilise hive parts, frames & equipment and store securely – use soda crystals in hot water (wear gloves) and scorch boxes, floors, crownboards with a blowtorch.

Maintain vigilance for Asian hornets, particularly new queens, and scan trees and bushes regularly for signs of nests.