

## **SEPTEMBER**

September is the month when the beekeeping year really begins – the honey crop has been removed and our actions now will determine how well our colonies will fare in the winter months ahead.

This month our inspections need to focus on the amount of stores in the hives and whether our colonies are big enough and healthy enough to overwinter successfully: it's time to perhaps unite small colonies, treat for varroa and to start autumn feeding if your colonies are light on stores. Whichever varroa treatment you decide on – and there's plenty of advice out there – you must keep records for at least five years: you can download a record card from BeeBase.

Here in the north of the county my bees are still bringing in stores of nectar and pollen from phacelia, rosebay willowherb, bramble and Himalayan balsam, and these they will keep for the winter. Wasps are becoming a nuisance in my apiary, constantly trying to sneak into the hives to plunder their hard-won stores and being rebuffed by the guard bees: I have reduced all entrances and put foam strips in the gaps between varroa floor and brood box. My wasp traps are catching plenty but it looks like a bumper year for the pests so I'll redouble my efforts – wasps can wipe out a small colony in days. This is also the peak time for Asian hornet activity so stay alert for them hawking around your hives or feeding on ivy and fallen fruit.

Now that you have taken your last honey crop you will need to make sure that your colonies are sufficiently well-provisioned to get through the winter: each full-sized colony will need around 20kg (44lbs) of stores as a minimum, more if the winter is mild. I leave my bees at least one super of honey and always do a visual inspection of each hive to be sure that there are good stores in the brood box, never assume. I also take the opportunity to rearrange frames of stores to ensure optimum accessibility then use the weight of the hive as my guide as the season progresses.

How do we measure the weight of a hive? Various scales and spring balances can be used but an easier, if less scientific way, is to lift one side of the hive about half an inch (hefting). If it feels so heavy you can scarcely lift it (feels as if it's nailed down), then the stores are likely to be adequate. For autumn feeding we use a ratio of 2:1, that is 2lb sugar dissolved in 1 pint of hot water (1 kg in 625 ml for the metrically-minded). Use white granulated sugar dissolved into hot water and allow it to cool before putting it on the hive – never heat the syrup. Use contact feeders (bucket feeders), rapid feeders (these have a central, covered, cone-shaped access) or large capacity feeders such as Miller or Ashworth. Feed early in the month to give the bees time to process the syrup sufficiently; too diluted and the syrup will ferment, causing dysentery.

When feeding take care not to excite robbing in your apiary: ensure you don't spill any syrup, check that the box surrounding the feeder has no gaps which could allow wasps or robber bees to enter, and feed only in the evenings. If you haven't already done so, reduce entrances and set up wasp traps.

Small colonies – of 5 frames of brood or fewer – have difficulty maintaining an adequate temperature in the cluster during the colder months and so have a lower chance of survival than larger ones. If you do decide to overwinter them you will need to give them extra protection, perhaps in a polystyrene nucleus box. I've successfully used polystyrene blocks around the brood nest in a standard National brood box. You may also wish to consider uniting small colonies: this provides an opportunity to select for your best queens. You will find instructions on how to unite colonies in beekeeping books and magazines, online and by asking more experienced beekeepers.

### **September Summary**

Estimate winter food stores by hefting hives and/or inspecting each frame.

Top up the stores to at least 20kg by feeding heavy syrup.

Be alert to wasp activity in and around your hives – reduce entrances and set up traps – and to robbing by other colonies.

Monitor for varroa mites and treat immediately if the natural drop exceeds 20 mites per day.

Monitor again after treatment to ensure it has been successful.

Unite small colonies or ensure that the hive or nuc is well-insulated

Remove the queen excluder towards the end of the month if you are leaving a super of honey on the hive. Clean it and store it under the roof ready for use.

Remain alert for the presence of Asian hornets, either hawking around your hives or feeding on ivy or fallen fruit. Use sweet baits in any traps and monitor daily.