

Stahlman Beekeeping Notes For 2022

**Procrastination and worry about
doing things right**



Issue # 3 January 15, 2022

It is not my place to tell anyone what to do! I can advise and suggest things, but there are things that come up which shouldn't worry you too much.

The most important advice is don't procrastinate

Beekeeping seasonal management is critical for the success of one's bees. Planning can be done well before the task is due. Waiting is procrastination and worry!

The January monthly tasks are pretty much the same year after year.

It is critical to check hives for food reserves and feed if the hive is light. Feeding food that does not have a lot of moisture will help bees. I like fondant and granulated sugar for winter feeding. Liquid feeding adds a lot of moisture to the interior of a hive.

I have been asked for a formula for fondant. The following formula has been around for a long time:

1. Use 1 part water to 4 parts granulated sugar.
2. Add ¼ tsp. vinegar per pound of sugar.
3. Bring the mixture to a boil - stirring constantly.
4. Boil for 3 minutes. Make sure to use a thermometer to check temperature.
5. Boil until the temperature of 234 °F is reached. It may take more than 3 minutes.
6. Remove from heat, and allow cooling to 200 °F.
7. Whip with whisk until whiteness occurs.
8. Pour (Quickly) onto waxed paper. Make sure you use a cookie tray to prevent run-over.
9. Allow the sugar mix cool – no whipping or stirring.
10. Remove the waxed paper (after the mix sets-up), cut into cakes and store in plastic zip lock bags. If the cakes are not kept cool, heat will cause them to get very sticky.

I have found that honeybees in hives with a lot of stored honey near the outside wall of hives still die from starvation in very cold weather conditions. Placing a cake of fondant directly above the winter cluster will make the difference between life and death for some really strong hives of bees.

Also keep in mind that feeding has one adverse effect on a colony of bees:

It will promote earlier swarming

Beekeeping is a gamble. One has a 50/50 chance that bees will not survive the winter. The old “snake oil salesmen are still around!” Be careful if you are worrying about buying anything you have not researched. I could make a fortune selling grape juice and some organic herbal oil for mite control. 50% of those buying my product would say it really worked for them. And 50% would say it didn’t work. Beekeeper worry what they did wrong if a product doesn’t work. The more expensive the product – the better it would work is the thinking. So instead of selling my grape juice for a reasonable \$1.00 an oz., I might as well ask \$8.00 an oz. I could ask those whose bees survived for endorsements!

The facts:

- 1 Not all bees are going to die off this year. The bees that survive the winter are survivor bees. If you read any ad about buying survivor bees – just remember that all bees that live from one year to the next are survivor bees.
- 2 Good management practices such as: getting your bees ready for winter in the fall will increase the chance for honeybee survival. Things like entrance reducers, food stored in the hive in the right location and frequent checks on the bees to make sure top covers are not blown off during storms make a big difference in a hive’s survival.
- 3 If you did nothing (procrastination), you cannot complain when your bees die.
- 4 If a hive has a failing queen, the hive is at risk of failure. A hive with a small population of bees might be saved but one early spring task is to buy a new queen to requeen the hive. Weak hives can be given frames of brood to give them strength, but most likely if a queen is introduced early into such a hive, a new queen will more than pay for herself in the amount of honey produced during the season.
- 5 Most winter losses occur after brood production begins. A hive of bees will consume a large amount of honey stores to feed brood. Just because pollen and nectar is being gathered early in the season, don’t think that feeding can stop.
- 6 If a hive dies out – That is not the end of the world. Order a package of bees to replace the bees that died.
 - a. The investment in equipment is expensive. Without bees the equipment will be targets of mice and wax moth.
 - b. If the bees are killed by mites, the mites die along with the bees. For the price of a package of bees, the hive retains its value, has a new queen, and most likely the bees will still gather a honey crop if the package is installed on drawn foundation.
- 7 One final task a beekeeper can do at this time of the year is build and repair equipment. If expanding the number of hives one expects to have for the coming year, one should have at least 2 honey supers ready for honey flows. Again Procrastination – will create a burden on time when much more is to be done!

Most of you reading this will be an experienced beekeeper after one year! It is typical for beekeepers to worry. You might start keeping good notes for 2022. You can rely on notes from last year, but our minds often fail us when we look back without notes.

Do what needs to be done! Messing with bees during the winter season can do more harm than good. If you suspect that a hive is queenless – if you see no brood it is better to wait and let the bees take care of things. Some queens are late to start egg laying. The key is, are there enough bees in the cluster to support brood rearing?

By mid-March, if the hive has no brood, replacement queens will be available. Moving a frame of brood to such a hive now is not going to resolve the problem. Just keep in mind that a hive might raise a queen from a frame with eggs in it! But without drones available for the new queen to mate – that new queen is going to be doing nothing for the hive. The frame of brood removed from the donor hive would be better left with the donor hive.

Are you worried about the need to open hives? One can easily check on bees when the weather conditions permit. Just checking the entrance is all that is required at this time of the year. If bees are coming and going, it is a very good sign that the hive is alive. But don't assume they are dead if bees are not flying. Don't make the mistake of pulling frames to see if there are bees somewhere in the hive. One easy check is to put your hand over the inner cover hole. If you feel warmth, the warm air will indicate that there are bees alive with-in the hive. When I lived in Ohio, just walking thru the apiary on a cold winter day with snow piled up on top covers could indicate live bees in a hive. With heat rising, the snow on the top covers would melt leaving a spot on the top cover without snow. That hive was alive even with the temperatures hanging around 10 °F.

My advice is don't worry about the small things. If one does the things that should have been done in late fall, the bees will take care of winter.

Now is the time to consider potential problems such as feeding, getting equipment ready for the time when bee populations will explode, develop a plan for managing hives, and check out monthly beekeeping task that lie ahead.

Nature is not something we can control. I can only feel for those who have lost everything due to tornado damage in Kentucky or had houses burned to the ground in Colorado. Yes, it is winter and the bees have handled winter for eons. Your interference is not helpful. Opening a hive in cold winter weather is like leaving a door or window open in your house. Heat escapes!

There is still a mystery in keeping bees during the winter season. You can find a good bee book to read and make plans on what you need to do with your bees when the weather turns warm.

I have often asked beekeepers selling equipment, why they are quitting? The major reason is not bee stings! It is because their bees died! When it is so easy to put bees back into equipment, I find that thinking rather hard to understand. Everything has a cost. When gas prices surged along with lumber prices, it did not stop me from driving my car or stop me from building more equipment. That should be the message going out to new beekeepers. The fact is honeybees are dying, not because of mismanagement, but because our environment is changing. Over-crowding of foraging area is one major cause – don't get caught up in blaming something else.

Foraging areas are disappearing at an alarming rate and have been disappearing for a long time. If any of you can remember the neighborhood where you lived 50 years ago, ask how it has changed? Rural areas have been less impacted but farming practices have changed.

I am asked what I would plant for honeybees? I am not at all optimistic when someone asks this question. How much land are we talking about planting? One plant? One acre? Is it a nectar plant the bees can benefit from? Honeybees need plants blooming all the time while they are saving some honey to survive the winter.



Have you checked your hives? We're heading into some cold temperatures this week-end. Our bees have been flying. This is what I am doing to keep weeds down in front of the landing board. Next week I will have some pictures of dead out hives to share.

When you get a warm day, it will be important to feed some of those strong hives. Because of the mild weather, the bees are ahead of their development from

last year. Good strong hives can die of starvation at this time of the year. What will you do to replace a dead-out hive? I will have some thoughts on the subject in next week's article.