

Stahlman Beekeeping

Notes For 2022

Getting Ready For Winter



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There is an old saying “Everything seems to be going backwards, yet everything is coming out straight.” I feel that fits this year pretty well in my case. I am aware every beekeeping year is different. It always has been that way. One year I would get a great Black Locust honey crop and the next year would be cold and wet just when the locust would bloom. Being raised in a commercial beekeeping family, I was taught to not count your eggs before you had them!

Thus, spending on non-essential things wasn’t done until the honey crop was in. In the 1930’s my grandfather talked about successful wintering and how important it was to do everything in one’s power to make it happen. My dad passed that information along to me and I have been trying to pass it on to others. But times have changed. They have changed big time!

The dying season was in the spring prior to mites. Most hives lived well into winter and beekeepers were facing problems of finding early queen replacement for failing queens, feeding hives short of food, and identifying disease issues. Every bee book had a chapter on Fall Management. I have before me a book by John E. Eckert and Frank R. Shaw who wrote a book based on the teachings of Everett E. Phillips 1915 to the 1960’s.

The chapter on Fall Management had a number of sub topics listed below:

Management for fall honey production, Principal Factors, Importance of a good queen, Colony populations, Adequate stores properly placed, Fall inspection for Disease, Protection of the colony, Management of weak or queenless colonies, Feeding Colonies and The storage and protection of comb.

The management practices then are still valid. When they describe management of weak or queenless colonies, I found the following passage interesting:

“When colonies are too weak to winter but are otherwise normal, the best practice is to kill their queen and to unite them with average to strong colonies. The colonies can be united by the newspaper method. If there is no choice between the value of the queens in the colonies united, the queens need not be killed. Dunham (1947a) found that 75 to 80 per

cent of the queens in the top stories of such united colonies survived. If colonies are united early in the fall, both queens may continue to lay for several days or weeks.”

They also add this “In the more temperate regions, weaker colonies with good queens can be wintered above a stronger colony if separated from it by a double wire-screened board or a thin inner cover with the bee escape covered with a double wire screen. The upper colonies are always given a separate entrance.”

There is always a lot of good information in these old books.

Flash forward to articles in bee books and magazines today.

I also have a modern book on beekeeping, “Better Bee Keeping – The Ultimate Guide to Keeping Stronger Colonies and Healthier, More Productive Bees” by Kim Flottum. Kim by the way was editor of Bee Culture Magazine for many years.

His Basic Winter Checklist is listed below:

Mites and diseases under control; More than enough food; Food and spaces in the right place; In the top box: Pollen and honey above the cluster & room in the center for bees and food and pollen, with a number of empty cells in the middle; Queen; Basic protections. Each of these topics are covered individually.

The absolute best text book on managing honey bees is written by Diana Sammataro and Alphonse Avitabile now in its Fifth edition. It is not a basic beginning beekeeping book. It is called “The Beekeeper’s Handbook”! It gives 59 pages of its 356 pages to the topic: Diseases of Honey Bees. Topics not covered in old beekeeping books include CCD, Nosema Disease, Amoeba Disease, Septicemia and Spiroplasma Diseases, Dysentery, Pesticide problems, The old diseases such as AFB & EFB, the Fungus diseases, others plus, the pest of honey bees starting with the mites.

Our modern bee magazines are filled with articles dealing with current practices to combat mites and diseases. Things like Darwin beekeeping, Bees and the web that traps them, The Story so Far on Amitraz Resistance in Varroa, Immunity in the honey bee, Bee Informed – The season for Surveys Again!, Bee Vet, Is It Analytics Time?, Thymol, and so many other titles not found in older magazine issues.

Are you confused yet? In the older days of beekeeping it was pretty simple. Our big challenge was finding American foulbrood colonies and treating them (some states allowed chemical treatment) or burning them. Winter was a season to read and relax!

Everyone wants an answer to questions immediately. We have so many experts – some with conflicting opinions. As an average beekeeper I see us moving backward -- Bee losses the top topic. We want to blame someone for the problem. We want to find an immediate solution to the problem.

I see how beekeepers are working hard in the face of all the challenges. I guess it would be easy to just throw in the towel and say the hell with it! Excuse my language.



I don't know if any of you remember Steve Tabor! Steve was a queen breeder and wrote a book called, *Breeding Super Bees*. That book is still available. Starting in the late 1980's I bought into his thinking about raising superior queen bees. He later moved to France because he was limited in getting stock from foreign countries shipped into the U.S.

Later, the U.S. bee lab in Louisiana was successful importing Russian bees for experimental purposes to help with the Varroa mite issues of the 1990's.

Today, those that are queen breeders use artificial insemination to develop queen lines. One of the longest breeding programs in the U.S. was developed by Sue Cobey. I was fortunate to know Sue when she was associated with The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Today Sue is at Washington State University working

with Steve Sheppard continuing to work with the New World Carniolan queen line. I can remember Sue telling me that there are those that raise queens and then there are those that breed queens. There is a big difference!

I fell into the category of raising queens as are so many others that may buy A.I. Queens from breeders. Using an A.I. queen to raise young open mated queens is an improvement in producing queens for sale. But keep in mind that 50% of all genetic material comes from drones and a virgin queen may mate with 20 different drones – many that may not carry the good genetic material one expects from a good queen. The bible when it comes to Instrumental Insemination is *Queen Rearing and Bee Breeding* by Harry H. Laidlaw Jr. and Robert E. Page Jr. This is what they have to say about open mated queens: "Open mating of queens that will head honey producing colonies cannot be relegated to the past, however; it remains an integral part of modern beekeeping, but must be utilized with greater care in selecting and providing the proper mates for the queens, and in saturating the environment where mating takes place with the desired drones."

I would like to ask "where can one find an area free of mutt drones?" We can sell beekeepers on paying extra for a queen produced from an A.I. queen mother! But is that queen going to produce and make the beekeeper get the desired results expected from that queen?

As long as individuals buy packages of bees from unknown sources with run of the mill queens – Tom Seeley is quoted as calling package bee queens as junk – I don't know for sure

that he said that any one raising queens runs the risk of their queens mating with “junk drones.”

I would ask anyone that now has a queen doing a great job of producing honey and seems to be able to have low mite counts to consider evaluating raising some queens from her next spring. All queens that survive the winter are considered “Survivor Queens”. Not all survivor queens are good breeding stock!

One of the major reasons for colony failures is not the fault of the beekeeper. Small weak hives at this time of the year are weak for several reasons.

- 1) Here in North Carolina our climate is an issue. Bees find plenty of food early in the bee season but come summer -- food for the bees is hard to find. The beekeeper if honey is removed from a hive must supplement the food for bee survival by feeding. The colonies not given supplemental feeding most likely will have to rob from other hives or die.
- 2) If the hive is weak due to pests such as Varroa mites and diseases, the problem could be the queen. The goal is to find stock disease resistant through genetic diversity. Strong hives are money in the bank!

Fall is a good time to evaluate a colony for winter survival. When spring arrives a strong surviving hive can be split very early. I favor vertical splits done as early as late February here in North Carolina and those north can make splits in March even with snow on the ground. By the way, the key to making splits is having some drone population in hives. When I see drone brood, I know I can make a split.

Next week: A check sheet for fall inspection!