

Wintering Bees in Central Iowa

By John Johnson

1. Location

Best locations for wintering bees have protection on the north and west from the wind and cold. Access to the sun is also preferable.

2. Disease and Mite Control

In early September when all supers have been removed, treat for Varroa mite and foulbrood control.

3. Queenright and Strong

Ensure colony is queenright and moderately strong with numbers of bees. An approximate definition of moderately strong means enough bees to cover five or six full depth frames on both sides. In September and October there will usually be some capped brood which will emerge and add to colony strength. Do not try to winter weak colonies. It seldom succeeds. Save the honey and combs for next spring. They are valuable. Unite weak colonies with other units or shake them out on the ground.

4. Adequate Feed

Ensure there is enough feed to supply the bees through the winter. Also ensure there are three open combs with little or no honey adjacent to each other in the middle of the upper and lower hive bodies. Bees will then cluster on the open combs in the middle of the hive body. They do not cluster well on combs of honey.

In Central Iowa, bees usually need approximately 7 full depth frames of honey in the upper and 4 frames in the lower hive body. If they do not have the quantity, supply additional honey from another source or feed sugar syrup. If it is necessary to feed sugar syrup, begin the feeding no later than late September. It frequently takes some time for the bees to deposit a sufficient supply of syrup into the combs.

5. Weather Protection

Weather protection increases chances the colony will survive the winter. The following practices work well in Iowa:

Install the entrance reducer in September after Varroa mite control treatment is concluded. This protects against mice and cold.

After October 20th, do the following:

- Make a second entrance between the upper and lower hive bodies. This provides for some ventilation and a place for bees to come and go if the lower entrance becomes blocked. (editor: present recommendation is to provide a single upper entrance above the top box for ventilation)
- Put Styrofoam over the inner cover. This provides insulation and helps reduce moisture build up in the colony.
- Using tar paper, wrap around and over the colony so that it is entirely covered by the tar paper and thus protection from the wind and provides important heat on sunny days. Bee supply houses sell treated cardboard which neatly fits over the colony for winter protection. This is convenient to use and provides good protection for the colony.
- Remember to cut a hole through the winter wrapping so the bees can utilize the opening between the upper and lower hive bodies.

NOTE: Some beekeepers may contend it is not necessary to provide winter protection in the form of wrapping and Styrofoam over the inner cover. Most successful beekeepers know from experience, the winter protection practices described in this paper are well worth the time and cost.

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