

BEGINNERS' BOX

From Cameron Crane, Liberty County Beekeepers

Wow another beekeeping season in wrapping up very soon but the next year will be upon us soon. I hope by the time you are reading this that you have prepared your hives for winter. I know most of the local beekeeping associations and clubs have covered winterizing in the last month or two. I've removed all my screen inner covers and replaced them with solid board inner covers. As autumn sets in the bees don't need too much cool or cold air flowing up through the hive. Remember warm air rises and the bees are trying to keep warm. If the top of the hive has too much ventilation all the warm air will rise on out of the hive making the bees work harder to stay warm. I've heard several people in Texas say they winter their hives on screened bottom boards and they do just fine. I do worry about cold air blowing up into the hive on windy days. I've collected a good stack of corrugated plastic (political signs) and will be cutting those down to slide in over the screened bottoms on my hives. Also be sure to put entrance reducers on your hives. The smaller opening helps the bees protect their stores, keeps cold air from blowing in and should be small enough to keep mice out that are looking for a warm place to winter. Don't open your hives if it is too cool outside. The bees are trying to keep it 92-93 degrees- if you remove the top all the warm air rushed out and cold air replaces it. When it is below 60 degrees that 30+ degree difference in temperature is quite a shock to them.

Remember the hives are also sizing down for the winter. You will see very little or no brood being raised, this is normal for this time of year. Most all the hives I've looked in the last several weeks have no drones in them either. I was surprised to see quite a few in a hive I saw last Sunday. There are always exceptions.

Be sure your hives have enough stores of honey for the bees to live through the winter. This can vary between how far north or south you live in Texas. Ask some of your local beekeepers how many frames the bees should have full of honey. Here is the middle of the state I like to see at least 6 full frames. If you are not seeing the better part of the upper box full of honey you should continue to feed them and watch them close in the early spring. As the hive builds up its numbers in the early spring it will need a good amount of honey to feed the larva. Those young bees will be the main workforce as the strong spring flow come on.

The past year of being involved and seeing other people's hives, rescuing hives that have been neglected and mentoring new beekeepers has taught me a number of valuable lessons. I'll go over a few that stick in my mind.

First: I've seen a few situations where someone had several hives and was not tending to them. What I found was that the bees had become very defensive and aggressive because they were having such a hard time fighting off pests- primarily Hive Beetles and Wax Moths. In the worst of them, there were two dead hives that had been taken over by hive beetles and then became a big breeding ground for wax moths. These two double deeps produced thousands of pest that were then invading the other two live hives. Both dead-out were totally filled with wax moth cocoons. The owner was getting out of beekeeping because even after re-queening twice his bees were still so mean that he didn't want them. Once I moved them to my property and destroyed the dead hives they calmed down tremendously! Lessons learned: 1- remove the equipment and clean up any hive that dies, don't just leave it out to breed more pests. 2- When bees are struggling with a hard life they become much more aggressive. If your bees seem to be getting more aggressive see if you can figure out what is stressing them out.

Second: Get your boxes stacked on straight. I saw this twice the past year- one box one another that left a gap on one end and an over-lap on the other. Again the bees were rather aggressive. The bees had so much more area to protect from pest or other bees wanting to rob their precious honey. The other big issue is that when it rains the water is running inside the hive. The bees like a dry home. In a good storm it could be a lot of water flowing through the hive.

Third: Maintain bee space. I've seen this issue the most often. Frames are designed to have 3/8" (bee space) between the combs when they are drawn out with comb and the end boards are together. If the frames are not pushed up against each other then it creates too much of a gap between the comb. The bees don't like that and will try to fill in the extra space- with comb or with propolis. I've developed a habit when I'm done inspecting a hive or adding a new box to use my hive tool to push all the frames tightly together. Some beekeepers push them all to one side, I push them together and center them- either seems to be just fine. When there is a gap between the end boards of the frames the bees propolis that small space making it harder to pull frames apart on the next inspection. The bees are also wasting energy either filling in small spaces with propolis or building comb in larger spaces. It is easier on the bees and on you to keep those frames pushed together.

The Annual Convention was awesome. I picked up a lot from most every speaker I got to attend. Dr. Larry Connor hit on a lot of things I've learning about queens and breeding. One of the best break-out sessions I attended was Greg Hammond's class on truth about chemical free beekeeping. Not at all what I expected but he a very informative presentation that centered on chemical free beekeeping as a goal. It went right along with what I've learned in the last two years: Chemical free beekeeping is not the easy choice and requires a lot more monitoring and combined efforts.

Now is the time to start planning your next year of beekeeping. Grab every opportunity to learn as much about beekeeping as you can. Attend your local beekeeping meetings, talk to other beekeepers in the area, go to beekeeping classes and school where you can. I'll be in Austin for the Austin Area Beekeepers Seminar on Jan 17th, in Brenham for the Central Texas Beekeepers School on March 28th and the TBA Summer Clinic in May or June. TBA Summer Clinic will be a one day full of classes and programs.

I hope to meet you at one of the event in 2015.

Joyful Beekeeping,

Cameron Crane