

National Bee Unit

Best Practice Guideline No. 7

Feeding Bees



Feeding is usually carried out when a honey bee colony is short of stores and there is no or little nectar flow. This often coincides with the removal of a honey crop but there are other times that it may be required.

When feeding bees

- Make up and use feeds of good quality pure sugar. White granulated sugar is the most suitable source today.
- Pollen and water may also need to be supplied.
- For convenience, especially for larger scale beekeepers, obtain a prepared bee feed from a suitable commercial source.
- Avoid feeding honey as it carries the risk of spreading bee diseases and the odour increases the likelihood of robbing.
- Use the right method, time and type of feeder for the task.
- Avoid spilling or leaving syrup open to bees in the apiary.
- Take care to avoid robbing.

Bee candy

- Candy or bakers fondant was first used to feed bees in the 18th century because it was the purest form of sugar then available.
- Today candy is used by many beekeepers to top up honeybee colonies in winter and for use in package bees, queen mating mini nuclei and queen introduction cages.
- It is best purchased from a bee supply merchant. If you wish to make your own recipes can be found in relevant text books but consistency tends to be variable when home made.

Making sugar syrup

- To make sugar syrup use white granulated sugar. With modern production methods it makes no difference if it was sourced from cane or beet.
- Do not use brown or raw sugars as they contain impurities.
- The syrup should be made up in the proportion of 1 kg. of granulated sugar to 630 ml. of water or 2 lb. sugar to 1 pt. of water. There is no need to boil the mixture but using hot water helps. Stir regularly to remove the air bubbles and dissolve all the crystals. When fully dissolved the mixture is clear and a very pale straw colour.

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Sand Hutton, York. YO41 1LZ

Telephone 01 904 462 510 e mail nbu@fera.gsi.gov.uk NBU Web site:

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- If syrup is stored for any length of time then a scummy black fungal growth may appear. This can be prevented by adding a little thymol. Thymol does not dissolve readily in water but a solution can be made up in a small sealable bottle. Fill it to one third with thymol crystals* and top the bottle up with surgical spirit. Add 2.5 ml. of this solution to 4.5 l. of sugar syrup or half a teaspoon to a gallon of syrup. *Obtainable from bee equipment suppliers.
- For some feeding, usually when it is for immediate use by the colony, thin syrup is used. This contains twice the quantity of water and is best made up for use as required.
- Sugar syrup can be stored and moved around in suitable clean plastic drums. In the apiary a plastic watering can is a useful device for filling feeders.

Feeders

There are three basic types of feeder used to feed sugar syrup to honey bee colonies

- **Rapid feeders**

These feeders comprise of a tray which is placed over the hive to which bees have access from below by means of a hole or slot arranged to stop them drowning. Versions such as Miller or Ashforth are made to the same external dimensions of the hive and are placed in lieu of the crown board. They can feed up to about 10 l. (or just over two gallons) at a time. Smaller plastic versions are available for placing over the crown board feed hole. Rapid feeders are ideal for feeding bees in the autumn but are of little use in cold conditions. When filling rapid feeders a small quantity of syrup is trickled down the side of the hole or slot to create a trail for bees to follow. Because of their large capacity Miller or Ashforth types are more convenient for autumn feeding.

- **Contact feeders**

These are plastic buckets of various sizes fitted with a lid having a gauze centre section. In use they are either filled with sugar syrup, or the syrup is mixed in the bucket. The lid is placed on the feeder to seal it up. In the apiary the feeder is inverted over an empty container to catch the small amount of syrup that will pass through the gauze before atmospheric pressure in the bucket drops thus holding the syrup in the feeder. It is then placed on the hive with the gauze patch over the crown board feeder hole. An empty brood box, super or eke will be needed to support the hive roof properly. Contact feeders are generally more accessible to bees in cool weather conditions so are more effective for emergency feeding and spring feeding.

- **Frame feeders**

These are containers that look like a brood frame with a slot at the top and have a float inside to prevent bees drowning. They are filled by pouring prepared syrup through the slot. Typically they are used to supplement the

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food and replace a frame within the brood box. In the UK they are mostly used for keeping nuclei 'topped up'.

- There are other types of feeder but these are not in common use.

Feeding sugar can be divided into three types

Autumn feeding

- As a rule bees only need feeding because a crop of honey has been removed by the beekeeper. When taking a crop ensure that the bees have sufficient stores to prevent starvation.
- September is generally the time of year chosen to feed sugar syrup as a supplement or substitute to ensure that honey bees have sufficient stores to carry them through the winter. Feeding is done after the honey crop has been removed and whilst the colony is still strong, warm enough for bees to move up into the feeder, able to take syrup down, invert and store it properly in the comb.
- Earlier feeding tends to be converted into brood so unless there is a risk of starvation wait until September.
- The amount of stores required by a colony to carry it through the winter varies with the strain of bee. The old British black only required about 10 kg. of honey to safely feed it through the winter, but today an average honeybee colony requires about 18–22 kg. or 40-50lb. to do so. Larger hives headed by prolific queens may require more. A BS brood frame when full of honey contains about 2.2 kg or 5lb. so assess the existing colony stores and feed the required balance using sugar syrup.
- Feeding at the time of some varroacide applications, usually those containing essential oils, is discouraged as this may increase robbing risks. Check the varroacide directions.

Emergency feeding

- These procedures are best practiced by avoiding starvation.
- Bees can starve at any time of the year and usually if this happens it is the beekeeper and not the bees who should take the blame. It is the responsibility of the beekeeper to make sure that bees have enough stores.
- Sometimes in winter bees use up stores on one side of the hive and become marooned away from stores elsewhere. This is known as isolation starvation. Frames of stores can be moved across so they are adjacent to the bee cluster. Do not divide the brood nest.
- If bees are short of stores in the winter and likely to starve then white soft candy (bakers fondant) is placed over the crown board feed hole. In the case of small colonies the crown board may need turning in order to position a feed hole over the bee cluster. Bees require water, often taken as condensation within the hive, to make use of candy. Candy is therefore taken slowly and does not excite the colony as much as other feeds. If sugar syrup is offered in a contact feeder cold temperatures may cause

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contraction of the container pushing syrup through the mesh and a wetting of the cluster. Correct autumn feeding prevents this scenario.

- If bees are short of stores at the spring inspection then feed thin sugar syrup using a contact feeder.
- In extreme cases when bees are starving spray them with a thin sugar syrup solution and fill an empty comb with sugar syrup. This can be done by pouring the syrup into the cells slowly by using a honey jar filled with sugar syrup and closed with a lid having 3 mm holes on opposite sides, or using a squeeze bottle, e.g. a cleansed washing up fluid bottle. When filled, place the comb adjacent to the bees.
- Remember March and April are the months when the bees will be using up food reserves fast as the colony expands and produces more brood. It is far better to have fed sufficient stores or left lots of honey in the autumn than to do emergency feeding in the spring. At this time a colony should have at least 4-5 combs with honey/stores, i.e. 9 kg. or 20lb.
- When removing a honey crop always check that sufficient stores remain to prevent bees starving. Feed immediately if needed.

Spring or stimulative feeding

- Many beekeepers feed a thin syrup solution to encourage brood rearing but providing the colony has sufficient stores, as stated previously, this is arguably pointless.
- It is a good plan to breed bees for the honey flows rather than breeding bees on the honey flow.
- To rear brood, bees need to feed a mix of honey or sugar, water and pollen, so to encourage brood rearing:
 - Ensure that the colonies are close to pollen crops or feed pollen.
 - Ensure that the colonies have sufficient honey and/or sugar syrup stores. If not feed a thin syrup.
 - Ensure that the bees have access to a clean water supply. If necessary use a water feeder.

Robbing

- Feeding syrup excites bees and is usually done when there is no, or little, nectar flow. As a result care should be taken to prevent robbing.
- Especially when feeding in autumn supply the feed to all colonies in the evening. Night will help quell bee activity. Reduce the hive entrance with an entrance block.
- Watch for signs of robbing – bees fighting, erratic flight and bees trying to enter a hive without meeting the guards. Generally stronger colonies rob weaker ones.
- If robbing starts reduce the entrance to one bee space using an entrance block and/or grass. This enables guard bees to protect the colony more efficiently. Placing a sheet of glass in front of the hive entrance so that bees have to go around the sides for access can also help.

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- The best cure to a robbing event is to move the besieged colony to another apiary.

Feeding pollen

- The best way to guarantee that honey bees have enough pollen is to ensure there are adequate and suitable pollen-bearing plants close to the bees. Assessing the plants around apiary sites is important to ensure plenty of pollens are available through the season.
- Don't forget that adequate pollen stores are very important. Pollen tends not to be stored in abundance but rather collected as required. Do not assume that there is enough pollen in the colonies as shortages are common especially in early spring.
- If you find it is insufficient then feed a pollen substitute, pollen patty or pollen collected during the previous season.
- Pollen can transmit bee disease so only collect it from a strong and disease free colony using a suitable pollen trap. Do not leave the trap on the hive all the time, as over an extended period it will deplete the colony of pollen. Avoid collecting during major honey flows. Pollen collected from one hive will be adequate to feed at least 50 hives.
- Avoid using other beekeepers pollen.
- Pollen can be stored in a number of ways but the easiest is to put it into paper or plastic bags and store it in a deep freeze at -18°C. When defrosted use immediately.
- Fresh or freshly thawed pollen can be fed to a colony by placing it in a shallow dish close to the feed hole.
- Pollen substitutes can be purchased from a suitable commercial source.
- When feeding substitutes follow the suppliers recommendations.
- If you find pollen is regularly insufficient in hives then a re-assessment of the apiary site should take place.

Feeding water

- Honey bees require water for processing stores, making brood food, maintaining humidity to ensure that eggs hatch, etc., and also for cooling the colony in hot weather. It is not stored in the hive, although 'reservoir bees' will be carrying it in their honey sacs.
- It is notable that feral honeybee colonies tend to follow water courses when they swarm indicating the importance of water to them.
- Apiary sites need to be assessed for the availability of suitable water. Many public complaints are made because of bees obtaining water from swimming pools, garden ponds, drying washing, etc., especially during dry periods.
- If bees do not have adequate natural supplies, then provide a supply by using a water feeder. Entrance-type feeders available from equipment suppliers can be adapted, but a communal site away from the immediate apiary may be more suitable. It will be necessary to make your own, and

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instructions can be found in some beekeeping text books and on the internet.

- If making your own water feeder remember that it is the natural inclination of bees to suck up moisture from a wet surface such as soil, sand or brick rather than from an open water surface. An area of about 75 cm². or 12 in² per colony is required at times of dearth. Do not permit the moisture to become stagnant. The landing area needs to be greater than the watering area.
- Bees have a preference for water that is warmer than 18°C and also for urine to which, like other insects, they are attracted by the salts contained.
- When first supplying water, add a little salt to encourage the bees to use it.
- If bees are contained in hives for long distance transport or during crop spraying in hot conditions they may require a supply of water to prevent overheating. A contact feeder filled with water and placed over a feed hole can provide this.

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