

## February Beekeeping

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February is usually a great month for the beekeepers. It's the start of Spring, St Bridget's day and nature awakens with the many plants that start to bud and flower. The snowdrops and crocus are in bloom now.



Figure 1 Spring Crocus loved by the bees

We usually get some good flying days which are so important to early colony development. The days are getting longer, and bees will take every opportunity to get out of the hive, gathering pollen and water. It's a testing time for the colony, stores could be getting scarce and it is the beekeeper responsibility to help in this situation.

February usually has its share of good and bad days, but if there are a few days that have reasonable temperatures the bees can move along the frames to the food sources. Many years ago, in the late seventies or early eighties February had 28 days of continuous frost, bees could not break the clusters and many colonies both small and large perished among plenty of stores. It was the year that all beekeepers experienced what "isolation starvation" really meant.

As always there is a lot you can do now to help your beekeeping, one thing you should not be doing is opening the hive and I'm certain no one would even think about it. There are several reasons why you shouldn't open a hive if the bees are alive in it. The first reason is that there is nothing to be gained from



Figure 2 Change Floorboards on Nucs

disturbing the colony. If the day is cold you will chill and kill the bees and even if they are flying the difference between the hive temp and ambient will be so great that the bees may not get time to cluster. Another very good reason is that they could ball the queen if you haven't already killed her as you wrench

these frames apart. Better to heft the hive, check the entrance, watch the bees fly in and out, watch for pollen and check the inserts for mites and activity as explained last month. If feeding is needed give them fondant. Most but not all hives now have open mesh floors, if you still have solid floor and especially on nucs, now is the time to give the colony a fresh clean and dry floorboard. It makes a difference. Again, check the old floorboard for signs of trouble. Excessive debris, a pile of chewed up comb would suggest mice are/were in the colony. It's probably a good idea to feed all nucs.

Hives have just come out of winter and may need some maintenance, take note of the hive that needs preservative applied and mark a week in your calendar

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for next month when you should attend to this task. Most of the hives we buy now are produced from Irish soft wood which will not last if it is not preserved. Hives suffer from dry rot after a few years. Your choice of preservative is up to you, but make sure it is insecticide free otherwise it will kill your bees.



Figure 3 Furze Bush in flower

Hive stands also need attending. Creosote is the best solution for this job. Stands need to be well preserved otherwise they will rot but more importantly badly preserved stands hold a lot of water and are a source of dampness on the floorboards. If your stand is soggy looking and with a green hue on it, you need to preserve it.

If you have located a new apiary site it may need some work on it before you move in the colonies. Now is a good time to start. All apiaries need to be stock proof, fence off if needed and put in a gate of some sort, a pallet will do, anything is better than lifting supers and all equipment over or under a fence, a recipe for a disaster. Cut back all vegetation, if needed to make sure the bees have a good access point into the apiary. For further details refer to our fact sheet No. 2 Apiary Site: Where to locate your bees. Of course you may need to plant a wind break, if so now is the time, plant a bee friendly hedge, laurel, cotoneaster, escallonia, viburnum to name but a few, if you want to go Irish the Hawthorn, Guelder Rose or Blackthorn.

While we are on the planting all beekeepers should be planting a tree, shrub, bulbs, or plants not only to help our bees but to lead by example. There are too many beekeepers moaning about farmers cutting ditches, trees being knocked, spare a thought for these farmers as you sit on your finely manicured lawn surrounded by leylandii hedging. Why not leave your lawn go wild it will save your back and your pocket? The bees won't complain about all the clover in flower or the dandelions. If you gathered tree seeds such as the chestnut or sycamore, they will be starting to sprout now so get them in the ground. I keep them stored in a pot of damp peat for the winter and sow now. Everyone should have at least one furze bush set in their garden It makes a good hedge. Grow and plant them on a ditch near your bees. Set a few trees in a derelict site. There is a lot we can all do, just now the start of February the following are flowering, winter heather, willow, hazel, viburnum tinus, crocus, snowdrop, plants are starting early. I wonder will the bees be the same.

Back to the more mundane jobs, have you all your frames washed and aired out, if not get going. Equipment may need preservatives, and some will need repair. You could start making up frames if you want to but do not add the wax yet. It is a bit early for foundations as it could go stale sitting in the frames for too long.

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If you are studying for your bee exams keep on going. Study is difficult and not suited to all. Determine what system suits you best. Some people like to underline an important point, highlight in the book, others like to write out a synopsis, major words, bullet points. What ever helps you. Of course passing exams never made a bad beekeeper into a good one but it will certainly help a good beekeeper to be a better one.

If you are a beginner and looking for a nuc this year, there are a few points to consider before you start. Have a look at Fact Sheet no. 1 First Steps in Keeping Bees. I hope you have a nuc ordered if not get going. Make sure you decide what hive type you are going for either Commercial or National. If you get a good nuc it will probably need to be transferred into a full brood chamber either straight away or a few days later so make sure you have a hive with enough frames and foundation to fill the brood chamber. Have you got a feeder? A jam jar will do if the hive is only a short distance away. You will need a bee suit, smoker, hive tool. Gloves can be sourced from Aldi or Lidl, get used to the ordinary household gloves. They are cheap, and disposable after a few inspections, helps to keep down disease. Nucs should have their queens clipped and marked, have a min of three frames of brood and on frames that are less than 1 year old. Several good producers



Figure 4 Frames tied into bundles.

replace most of their frames before they sell a nuc to a beginner. Of course, the colony should be disease free and a varroa population at an acceptable level. No one can guarantee varroa free bees now. Stay local avoid importing living animals, plants or insects that can go back into nature and you therefore have no control over it, a recipe for trouble. Remember you are only placing your order now, April is the month to get a good over wintered nuc, so don't rush into collecting remember the seller must open the colony, inspect the frames and bees, clean up the frames if not changing and check the queen for laying viability.

February is a short month, if weather is somewhat reasonable it's a great time for our bees, the start of another build up. Heft and feed if needed, make up your frames, get your equipment ready, start to plant for the bees, keep up the study. Keep a watch on the entrances, enjoy those earlier foragers as they bring in the pollen several colours, light brown from the Viburnum, several shades of yellow and orange from the furze, crocus and snowdrops, white from the box bush. Lots to do so get going and enjoy, happy beekeeping.