Spring Management

The first signs of spring bring great delight to the beekeeper who hopes this will be his/her best year yet! The swamp cabbages and the maple trees begin producing that all important early supply of pollen and nectar. The days are becoming longer and warmer, and the hive activity is rapidly increasing. A new season has begun!

The colony has reached its lowest peak in population and should now be gaining strength to prepare for the first major nectar flow. Honey consumption is high, as the bees use more to feed the growing brood and to keep the hive warm. This is a time to be especially watchful of a hive whose honey stores may dip to a dangerous low. Spring feeding may become essential to keep a hive from starving. Only a few worker bees are yet available to go out and collect the meager supply of nectar. Some sugar syrup and perhaps a pollen substitute might be good insurance for a growing colony. The best planning, however, should take place in the fall, whereby the beekeeper has left plenty of honey for wintering over.

Although the beekeeper may be quite anxious to inspect the colony after a long winter, it is advisable to wait for a warm day with a slight nectar flow before opening the hive. This will help reduce stress on the bees and cut down on robbing tendencies.

Following is a general timetable of spring management.

Early to mid March

Time to begin watching for increased hive activities. Any colony which has not survived should be closed up immediately to prevent robbing and possible spread of disease.

Tilt or lift hive to gain a sense of how much honey is present in the hive. If it seems light, then feeding 2 parts sugar to 1 part water may be in order. Feeding the syrup from above the hive will make it more available to the bees, as it may be too cold for them it go down to the front entrance. A pollen substitute may also be fed to encourage the queen to lay more eggs. The objective of this early spring feeding is not only survival, but to build a strong colony, capable of harvesting that first major nectar flow.

Feeding several jars of sugar syrup placed on two 3/8 inch high sticks over an inverted inner cover, and inside an extra super will allow more available syrup at reduced maintenance to you and less stress to the bees. Feeding should continue until the bees have opportunity to gather ample nectar, or until they stop taking the syrup.

This early feeding time is a good time to medicate the hive with **Terramycin** and also **Fumidil-B** if desired. (Reference Fall and Winter Management for proper dosages.) **All medication should be given at least one month before the honey supers are place on the hives.**

Late March and early April

Now the time may be right for that first inspection of the hive. Choose a warm (70 degree) day, with little or no wind. Try not to have the hive open any longer than possible, as the spring air has a tendency to be dry, and the bees need warmth and humidity for the brood.

You will want to check for the queen, or at least signs that she is present, such as eggs or larvae. **DO NOT REARRANGE THE FRAMES OF BROOD YET**. It is too early in the season, and you may cause some of the brood to be chilled, as there are not enough nurse bees to keep the newly arranged frames of brood warm. Take note of her brood pattern; is it solid, or is it spotty? If it is spotty, the queen should be replaced as soon as possible. Look for early signs of swarming, such as queen cells in the lower portion of the frame or supersedure cells in the middle or top portions. Here again, you may want to requeen to save valuable time.

Check the brood for signs of disease and also notice any signs of dysentery that may be present from an especially long or stressful winter. If you have weak colonies (5 or less frames of bees) you would be best served by combining two weak hives and destroying the inferior queen. The newspaper method is a good way to combine colonies.

This is an excellent time for replacing old frames. Planning for this begins in the fall. Place frames that are the oldest, darkest, or those with many drone cells on the outer sides and in the lower brood chamber. The bees will only be using the center top of the two brood chambers in this early part of the year, so you will easily be able to remove the old frames and replace them with new foundation. This will create a minimum of disturbance to the bees, and you will not have to lose brood or honey when pulling out the old frames. Replacing 4 to 6 frames each year will keep the hive in a healthier, more productive condition.

Note, also, the condition of the rest of the hive. While the hive is apart, the bottom board can be scraped of old debris and dead bees, saving the workers' energy for more productive tasks. Examination of other pieces of equipment can tell you if anything needs to be replaced this year. Bottom boards and outer covers especially need to be watched for rot or carpenter ants.

Mid April

Unless the hive was exceptionally strong on an earlier inspection, now is probably a good time to reverse the upper and lower chambers to place the brood nest on the bottom. This will give the queen the necessary space to continue enlarging the brood area.

If the hive was reversed earlier because of its strength, it may need to be reversed again, and perhaps a honey super placed on top.

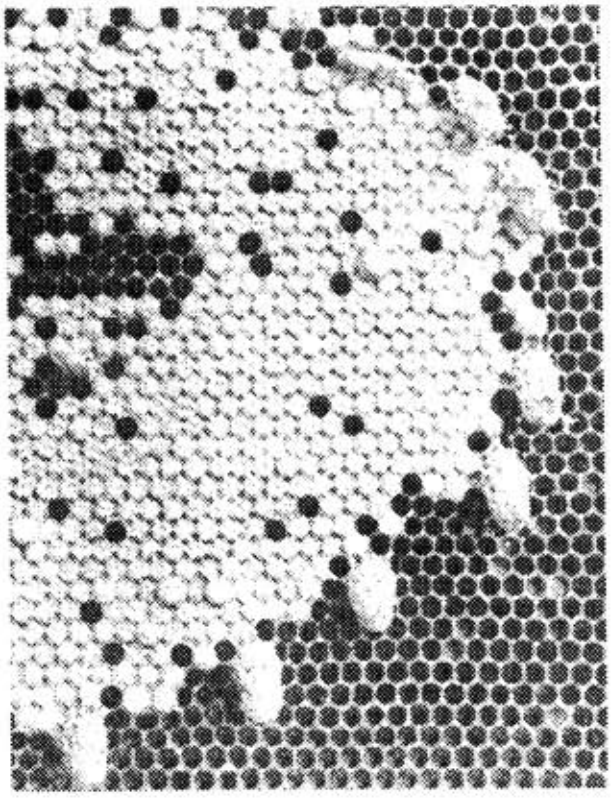
Turn the entrance reducer so the bees have access to the larger opening unless the hive is extremely weak.

It is best to place a honey super on to furnish extra space, than to allow conditions to become crowded. **WHEN IN DOUBT, SUPER UP!**

Late April

Be sure to keep an eye on the honey stores in the hive, especially if it has been rainy or too cold for the bees to work on collecting nectar. The hive is rapidly gaining strength and will use a good deal of honey each day to feed the brood. Continue feeding if necessary. If the weather is good, be sure to have that honey super on top!

Remove entrance reducers if the weather seems favorable and the hive is strong enough.



May

Continue inspections of the hive every week and a half or so. Watch for signs of swarming. Make sure there is plenty of room for storing honey and also for brood. Some manipulating of the frames within the brood chambers to help the queen use the space more efficiently may be done now that the weather is warmer.

A very strong colony may be divided; or a few frames taken out to help strengthen a weaker hive and/or start a nucleus hive. Remember though, that one strong hive produces far more than two weak hives.

Requeening every year can help reduce swarming tendencies, and some experts believe requeening can also help reduce the possibilities of some diseases. This can be done in the spring or in the fall; each offers different advantages.

Spring management is very important to setting the pace for the kind of season and harvest you might expect. Of course, there is nothing to be done to change the weather, but if you've taken the time and energy to give your hive the best advantage possible, then the summer will carry less concern, and more enjoyment as your bees go about doing their work in the overall scheme of nature.