



Bees and When to Harvest Honey

Time to change when we harvest honey, what we feed bees--old ways, a new paradigm.

By Tom Meade

The Death of Honey Bees

In North America, colonies of Honey bees are dying in alarming numbers.

The death of Honey bees began to make news in late 2005-2006, when beekeepers reported losses of 30 percent to 90 percent.

More recent surveys of beekeepers indicate higher than expected colony losses in the 2006-2007.

The world's leading bee scientists and the U.S. government are studying the causes of what they call Colony Collapse Disorder, or CCD, and they believe there may be a combination of culprits that weaken the bees' immune systems.

"A perfect storm of existing stresses may have unexpectedly weakened colonies leading to collapse," according to the U.S. Agricultural Research Service. "Stress, in general, compromises the immune system of bees (and other social insects) and may disrupt their social system, making colonies more susceptible to disease."

Viruses spread by mites, pesticides, contaminated water, and poor nutrition are among the suspected sources of stress that make American bees disproportionately susceptible to CCD.

Online resources

USDA bee research lab, Beltsville, Md.

USDA CCD overview

Carl Hayden Bee Research Center, Tucson, Az.

Holistic beekeeping at Spikenard Farm

Pfeiffer Center

Robbing The Bees, A History of Honey by Holley Bishop

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Don't Honey bees eat honey?

If they have honey, they eat it.

Trouble is many American beekeepers take away a significant amount of honey.

They rob the honey when bees need it the most, during the fall and winter when there are no flowers bearing nectar, the basis of honey.

While the scientists continue to study the problem many beekeepers – including people who know that poor nutrition may



be one of the culprits – continue to feed their high-fructose corn syrup and refined-sugar syrup to their bees.

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Honey-harvesting Practices Need to Change

That habit bothers Günther Hauk, former director of the Pfeiffer Center in Cedar Ridge, N.Y. where an international student body comes to study biodynamic principles of agriculture.

He also is author of *Toward Saving The Honey Bee*, published by the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association.

Hauk is president of Spikenard Farm in Carrollton, Ill., where he teaches biodynamic bee keeping and conducts research in the farm's apiary.

Today, Günther Hauk and his students believe it's time to return to old ways and a new paradigm for harvesting honey.

For the sake of the bees.

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Taking a Stand on the Treatment of Bees

"Many blame viruses, mites, bacteria and beetles for the bees' failing vitality, but these are only symptoms of what ails them," Hauk writes on the farm's website.

"Exploitive and mechanistic bee keeping methods...are the real culprits....The bee's very existence is threatened by our efforts to capitalize on her largesse."

In his book – published in 2002, four years before the first cases of CCD were reported, Hauk spoke of a crisis in bee keeping as bees were being overwhelmed by pests and disease even then.

"Is the honey bee, in fact, trying to tell us something?" he asked.

"It is, in fact, screaming to us through its overwhelming illness and fatality statistics, that it is not merely a mite or some other invader, but, in fact, our whole approach to its existence that has continued to weaken it and caused its health and resistance to deteriorate."

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Corn Syrup Diet=Unhealthy Bees?

America is one of a small number of countries where beekeepers can afford to feed high fructose corn syrup and refined sugar to their bees.

Some beekeeping schools and beginner's books advocate feeding sugar syrup to bees in the fall to carry them through the winter.

They recommend feeding more syrup in February to simulate a nectar flow that stimulates the queen to start laying eggs earlier than she would naturally.

At Spikenard Farm's Honey bee sanctuary, Hauk does not feed sugar to his bees.

At a recent meeting of a beekeepers association in New England, an organic beekeeper asked, "What would happen if we fed our kids high-fructose corn syrup and refined sugar every day?"

"We already know the answer to that," someone mumbled, hinting at America's obesity problem. "Just visit your local middle school."

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Too Big a Sacrifice for More Honey

"Then why are we advocating the feeding of syrup to our bees?" the organic guy asked.



“Greed,” someone else said.

The honey that beekeepers take is supposed to be “surplus” honey that the bees will not need to carry them through the winter.

In the northeast, a bee colony theoretically needs about 60 pounds of honey for the winter.

Many American beekeepers remove what honey they consider surplus in late summer or early autumn.

That practice began in the late 19th century. Until then, beekeepers left all the honey on the hive until spring when fruit orchards began to blossom and a new flow of nectar was underway.

Only then were beekeepers certain that the bees’ “old” honey was truly surplus and ready for harvest.

About the Author: Tom Meade is a writer, beekeeper and vegetable gardener in Rhode Island

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