

# 2026 Stahlman Bee Notes

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## Some thoughts on keeping bees



For most of us, weather determines much of what we can do and when. I spend a lot of time talking to beekeepers. My friend Keith, a bee buddy, and I visited the 5 County Bee Yard close to Zebulon, N.C. on March 24<sup>th</sup>. The day was a bit chilly and he discussed activities planned for the bee yard this year.

One can find almost any type of hive configuration that has been on the market or written

about in this bee yard. This includes a long Langstroth hive, a top bar hive as well as a mixture of hive set ups (8 frame and 10 frame). The club also has a queen project grant to raise queens. Thus, members can share various styles and ways to keep bees. As Keith said to me, *"the best way is what you decide works for you."*



Early spring is a period of population growth. Daylight hours are getting longer, the dormancy of plants is now over and both pollen and nectar are abundant. These are natural events year after year. Bees have evolved for millions of years and as Thomas Seeley writes "natural selection has structured these "insect search committees" so they make the best possible decision." Swarming is a natural instinct and some very strong

surviving colonies prepare to swarm very early in the bee season. **"Maybe even when the weather is not ideal for swarming."**

Mother nature is cruel. What happens if a colony swarms early -- the weather turns cold for a period of time? The swarm has only enough food to sustain itself for several days. And the Virgin queen in the hive that swarms -- she needs to mate [flying conditions and drones need to be available] for success. **If a colony makes a mistake in judgement it is doomed.**

April [for many beekeepers] is the most important month to inspect the brood nests in detail. Bee populations are lower than they will be later in the season. Fewer bees mean the queen can be located much easier before additional honey supers are added to the hive. There is a world of difference between an established colony of bees and a newly established colony of bees.

Management of colonies depends on bee population. Small bee populations can develop into colonies and prepare for winter survival. How bees are managed differs in many ways. However, bee biology is the same for all – honey bees are honey bees. This is swarming season. Nuc's recently purchased can swarm if not given room for brood and egg laying and can produce some surplus honey. Package bees usually take 8 to 12 weeks to reach WHAT IS CONSIDERED PRODUCTION STAGE (when colonies gather honey or can be split). Thus, when new package bees are hived on new foundation, the bees will miss the opportunity to gather a honey crop.

Those of us that had some colony losses this past winter can use that drawn comb to our advantage. To honey bees, drawn comb is like money in the bank. Another issue that beekeepers face is when to stop feeding the bees. As long as new foundation is in a hive and the bees are working building cells, it is important for bees to stimulate their wax glands. This is accomplished by a strong honey flow or feeding syrup.

A question I often answer late in the bee season is [why are the bees not drawing the foundation in the hive?] The answer is the honey flow is over! Honey flows stimulate bees to produce more brood and draw and build comb. Now is the time to feed if a beekeeper wants new foundation to be drawn out. Feeding should be done only when bees are facing starvation or when a beekeeper needs foundation to be drawn out. **If one is expecting to take honey from a colony, feeding should stop before the honey flow begins.**

I have already put honey supers on my bees. Just before putting on supers, I checked every frame in the brood boxes. I found the bees storing honey in the brood chamber and one colony with the beginning of swarm cells. Swarms are good in a way! **Good for the bees but bad for me!** It is well known, that a swarm of bees can cost a beekeeper the loss of one medium super of honey (about 40 pounds of honey). At the cost of those selling honey in the Raleigh area, this is about (\$400.00) Commercial beekeepers selling honey at the market price would still be losing about half that or more.

Putting a super with new foundation on a hive, will not stop the bees from swarming. Thus, it is time for those with established colonies to inspect brood chambers and carry out established methods of swarm prevention. If one wants more colonies, splitting colonies is a good way to open up a brood chamber. [Opening up the brood chamber is simply removing frames of brood

from an established colony (replacing them with new frames) and moving the removed frames to other hives or as in the case of the Demaree system – above the brood chamber.] In my commercial days, it was shaking bees into bee packages every two weeks. Even then, I still lost some swarms!

It is apparent to me that we mess with the order of bee reproduction to fit our wishes. The commercial beekeeping business is based on managing bees for the maximum profit. There is no doubt that humans can make money by keeping bees and using natural instincts of the honey bee to swarm allows us to manage them – books are filled with ways to manage bees for profit. But, there are those that keep bees only for the fun of it! All that is expected is some honey as a reward for the time and energy put into to keeping them.

*For all of us, the task of keeping bees requires something more than buying a box and putting bees in it.* NO matter what, *“the best way is what you decide works for you”* is to realize that: the drop-out rate is high for those that keep bees.

If time is an issue and inspections can not be carried out, **expect bees to swarm.**



#### Spring Inspections are required!

- Check to see if the queen is laying eggs. It is not necessary to find the queen but it is always reassuring when she is found during inspections.
- Check to see that there is brood in all stages of development. (eggs, larvae, and capped cells)
- Check for the general health and cleanliness of the hive. It is good to take mite counts using the powder



sugar or alcohol methods. Begin a treatment plan if 3 or 4 mites are found in the test.

- Check the colony for surplus food stores. At this time of year, the bees will be using much of what they bring into the hive to feed brood. New white comb should also be present – indicating that the bees are bringing in surplus pollen and nectar.

- Check that the colony has started to increase bee populations. This is very important to those starting new colonies. Count the number of frames with bees. This is a good indication that supers need to be added when 75% of the frames are covered with bees.
- Check for queen cells – they are sure to indicate that a colony is preparing to swarm. Please note: Any queen cell built over an existing worker cell is a sign of trouble. Don't cut those cells down to prevent a swarm. They may be emergency queen cells – Check for eggs. Bees building emergency queen cells indicate that there is a problem – most likely the queen has died. There is also another possibility that the bees may be replacing the old queen – in this situation one will find far fewer queen cells present.
- Check to make sure the bees have enough room to expand. Honey stored in the brood area can lead to a congested brood nest. Those beekeepers using queen excluders will need to be more aware of this issue and plan on using something such as the Demaree system to prevent swarming.
- Check for bees hanging on the outside of the hive. This could be a sign of crowding. In early spring [bees crowding outside the hive] could be a sign the colony is about to swarm.



- Check for wax moth and small hive beetles. These are pests that cause serious damage to comb. Both are signs that bees are not strong enough to defend themselves against the damage pests can do to a hive of bees. If not inspected, a frame may look like this – the colony already beyond hope of recovery.
- Existing hives may need a good cleaning of propolis.

Propolis is a sticky substance that can make the removal of frames difficult. In fact, it is a good idea to use the hive tool to scrape existing burr comb and build-up of propolis from frames on a regular basis.



- **The job being done by the queen in the hive should be included in every inspection. Many queens are superseded without the beekeeper knowing it happened. Marked queens are a good idea. More on this in an upcoming article.**