

"I cannot let well enough alone. I get restless. I have to be doing different things."

— Vivien Leigh

I love helping other beekeepers, whether they are want-to-bees, second-year self-proclaimed wunderkinds or grumpy old-timers. The teacher in me thinks that it is fun to answer questions and help people take the next step in their learning adventure, especially on the rare occasion when I get a follow-up report saying, "Hey, that worked!" Even more rewarding, though, is when someone says, "That's a good answer, but have you considered this..." or "I tried that, but this is what works better for me at my bee yard..." I strive to experiment, adapt, evolve and improve as a beekeeper and a bee-educator, and I rely on all of you to help me do so.

I recently came across a question about what to do with a weak hive. This was asked mid-December; the weather had turned out nice that day, sunny and warm, and the beekeeper had done a full inspection of their two colonies. One was going gangbusters and the other was clearly lagging. What should be done with the lagging colony?

Folks offered well-reasoned advice about combining, feeding and so on. Compelled to throw my two cents into the discussion, I said that, in my opinion and consistent with my personal practices, the right thing for me, in winter, is to never do a thorough pull-out-frames inspection in the first place. Then the question of "what should I do?" never comes up.

I commonly see beekeepers of all experience levels get downright giddy when the temperature on a winter day rises into the mid-60s or even hits 70. This happens fairly often in Piedmont NC and it always has. Cold spells are interrupted by false springs, often followed by a blizzard. That's one of the many things that makes North Carolina such a fun place to live: every day has new surprises! If you don't like the weather, just wait.

When a warm day comes along, it's



It's January. The leaves have fallen but there isn't snow on the ground. Tomorrow the temperature will be in the upper 60s. Should we open up our hives and do a thorough inspection?

common to see hive tops coming off and every frame getting a close review. Is there lots of brood? Hurray! Or if not, bummer! How are the honey stores holding up? Can we win a game of *Find the Queen*? Perhaps even more often, the question becomes, "Hey, where'd my bees go?"

Nice weather or not, my position remains the same. I resist doing any intrusive meddling between November 1st and March 1st. My goal is to get my colonies all buttoned up in time for the start of winter and not mess with them until the start of spring.

This rule does not rule out feeding when needed or conducting an oxalic acid clean-up treatment in mid-December. Neither of those require intrusion into the hive. No frame-pulling is required. It also does not mean that I don't inspect my colonies in the cold months. I just do so without causing any disruption. See December 2017's "[Winter Inspections](#)" for tips on how to easily assess a colony's status in winter without pulling out frames.

One important reason, or perhaps an excuse, for my approach is that winter, in itself, is stressful for our colonies. If we poke 'em they have little if any time to get things back into proper order. They are essentially in stasis during much of December and January and are not robust. If our inspection accidentally causes the death of some bees, how will those losses be made up? If we break the propolis insulation between the boxes and covers, who is going to gather more propolis to repair it? If we, dare I

say it, unknowingly squish the queen, is there any hope at all that a new one will be raised and properly mated?

Keep in mind that warm days don't mean warm nights. A January daytime temperature of 65 degrees may be followed a few hours later by nighttime freezing temperatures. The bees must be in tight cluster when it gets that cold at night. If we shuffle everything around in our nice-afternoon inspection, they have but a few hours to get their home back in order before the cold temperatures hit. That falls under the definition of stress. Stress plus stress equals more stress. How much stress can our colonies take? We can do that experiment or we can assume that stress avoidance is a better strategy.

A second reason for my "winter is off-limits for invasive examinations" philosophy is that, except for feeding, if we find a problem in winter, what can we do about it? The only Varroa treatment that is appropriate in winter is oxalic acid, and a mid-December nonintrusive clean-up treatment is a good strategy. But later, say by mid to late January, the colony has begun brooding up so oxalic acid isn't effective. Requeening isn't an option because queens aren't available. Combining is extremely stressful, especially at this time of year. Should we risk harming a strong colony to save the meager resources of a losing one?

I've found that it doesn't pay to second-guess my November assessments later in the winter. If a colony is weak enough that winter failure is a likely outcome, it gets combined with a strong colony in fall. Only colonies with a good chance to survive are kept. If I were to assess those in January, what could my conclusions be? If the number of worker bees has decreased, that is totally expected. If there is little or no brood, that again is totally within the bounds of normal. Brood rearing this time of year can limp along and then explosively increase once maples bloom and the bees have a few warm afternoons to forage on them. If it is set up to go on November 1st (well fed, mite-free, decent size) then a colony should be able to coast into spring. A colony that was "good

enough" in fall was labelled that way because it will likely be fine in spring; its path to get there (early start, late start, etc.) is irrelevant.

How does this philosophy work out for me? Over the past decade, I typically have had no wintertime colony losses (defined as November 1st to March 1st). That doesn't mean I don't have losses at other times of year, especially due to queen events that go sideways. But I don't lose colonies during the winter months when they are supposed to be more or less dormant. If I had meddled would my record be any better?

Let me reiterate that for this strategy to be effective, my bees be must winter-ready. See September 2014's "[Controlling Winter Losses](#)" for a step-by-step plan for preparing for winter.

All of this is really just a philosophical approach, one that works for me. I'm friends with beekeepers whose production objectives require them to actively tinker with colonies very early in the season, but for a hobbyist with my situation and goals, I don't see a reason to. Whether you agree with my points or not is entirely up to you, and more importantly, whether you choose to adopt my approach is also your choice.

Always remember that *we own our bees; our bees don't own us*. So even if something may be "better for the bees", if we want to do differently then go for it! Few of us depend on our honey bees for our financial security, so putting colonies at risk is something that we may freely choose to do if our curiosity or impatience wins out. But if you do conduct mid-winter down-to-the-bones inspections, take good notes. Then next time, maybe we can appreciate F.P. Jones' wisdom when he said, "*Experience is that marvelous thing that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.*"

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