

"It's not the will to win that matters—everyone has that. It's the will to prepare to win that matters."

— Paul "Bear" Bryant

I've gotten lots of requests from bee clubs over the years to do a "Preparing for Winter" presentation in October. My first response is always, "Umm... the time to prepare for winter starts in August!" I'm sure my long-time readers know that. But as a reminder to new beekeepers, a pat on the back to well-prepared ones and a gentle push for those (like myself) with good intentions who are falling a bit behind while the clock runs out, let's review some tried-and-true methods for reducing or eliminating winter losses and setting the stage for a magnificent Spring 2027. This has all been said before but it bears repeating.

Focusing on the things that matter

I often see beekeepers spending lots of time and effort on their favorite complaint, usually one that they have a neat gizmo to deal with, but not giving the core issues the attention that they deserve. Notably, research at NCSU has found that the majority of colony losses in the US are due to three things:

- Varroa mites and their viruses
- Starvation
- Queen issues, such as failure to successfully requeen after swarming

Years ago, I adopted what I call my 3-Legged Stool for winter prep that attempts to address these factors. Ever since doing so, I've typically had zero colony losses between November 1st and March 1st. I assure you that I am not an extraordinary beekeeper or that I live in a bee paradise; the opposite is more accurate. The approach is detailed in "[Controlling Winter Losses](#)", and has three steps:

1. Properly managing Varroa mites
2. Copious feeding before it is needed

¹ Oxalic acid vapor treatments are only truly effective when colonies are broodless, despite what You-Tube idiots may preach to the uninformed. See

3. Culling weak colonies

Varroa mites

We need to have healthy, Varroa-free bees going into winter. The way to have those is to have healthy, Varroa-free nurse bees to raise them. Doing the [bee math](#), we should apply appropriate miticides starting around August to accomplish this goal, then do [follow-up testing](#) to ensure that the treatment has worked as hoped. We cannot relax at that point, however, because late-fall [mite bombs](#) from failing colonies in our surrounding neighborhood can destroy all of our hard work.

Complicating things this year is that we've had an unusually hot and humid fall, limiting our choices of miticides and making simple sugar-shake assessments unreliable. But if all this was easy, where would the fun of the challenge be?

At my place, I implemented my August/September treatment with Apiguard without any problems. I'll assess the effectiveness of that treatment and, if warranted, completely clean up my mites very soon with Formic Pro. Then on December 15th I will apply an oxalic acid treatment when my colonies are broodless, or nearly so.¹ Following this routine for the past few years, my colonies have been healthy, booming and relatively mite-free coming out of winter the following spring.

Starvation

All beekeeping is local, but in my specific part of the North-Central Piedmont, we had a terrible spring nectar flow followed by a long, hot, dry summer. (FYI, not that it matters, but 2026's "unofficial summer" – the days between Memorial Day and Labor Day – was the longest stretch possible: May 25th to September 7th.) Fall has been hot and dry too so far at my place, with very little of the expected fall floral activity from goldenrod and asters. Most of my ornamental flowers were cropped to the

"[Deciphering EPA's Advisory on Varroa Mite Treatments](#)" for more on freewheeling interpretation of EPA labels.

ground by hungry deer this past spring, right up to the flower pots on my porch. It is likely that the wildflowers have suffered a similar fate.

My colonies have recently started finding nectar, somewhere, but they have very little capped honey stored away. That doesn't bode well for winter survival unless I start pumping them up with sugar syrup. I'll need to get going with that ASAP so that the bees have time to cure all that syrup – once cold weather puts them in cluster, activities like curing cease. "[Syrup Formula Basics](#)" is a reminder of what fall feeding typically involves, while "[What makes a syrup feeder a good one?](#)" has thoughts on which feeding method or device gets the most syrup in the right place in the quickest time.

If I find that I haven't gotten my hives up to sufficient weight before winter arrives, I'll be forced to do some "[Emergency Feeding in Winter](#)". However, don't be fooled: syrup that the bees have properly cured and properly stored in the appropriate places is far superior to emergency feeding.

Culling

Perhaps the most effective but emotionally hardest thing for a hobbyist beekeeper to do to eliminate winter losses is to not carry weak colonies into winter. "[The Flip Side of Making Splits](#)" describes a few of the many techniques that can be used to combine weak colonies with strong ones.

Right now I've got a colony that swarmed late but still gave me a bit of honey. When I checked a couple of months ago, it wasn't doing very well. But an inspection last week showed that they had taken off like a rocket, with lots of brood (compared to before) and a good bit of fresh nectar put away. They still don't fully occupy a single deep, but they have improved significantly. This colony is like Little Orphan Annie, one to cheer for and give every opportunity to succeed, right? Hmm. Maybe in June, but not on October 1st. I know from experience that weak colonies don't improve over winter. The smart move is to combine it with a strong colony, focusing both my

resources and my emotional commitment on winners, not losers. This strategy works. I wish there was an alternative, such as letting the spunky little queen retire to the tropics! But that's not reality.

Busy work

There are other things that we can do to prepare for winter, such as installing mouse guards (see "[A Few More Wintering Tips](#)"), but these are mostly icing on the cake, not live-or-die actions. Other things, like wrapping hives and installing upper entrances, are great for Arctic-like regions but are completely unnecessary in our area. You may have your own cherished fall ritual; if it makes you happy, regardless of its usefulness, go for it! Beekeepers often do things that aren't truly value-added from a biological or productivity standpoint. At my place, I would argue that reversing boxes in the spring belongs in that category. But that doesn't mean we can't do it if it gives us some sort of satisfaction. Just remember to do the important stuff first.

My goal for the past two decades has been to button up my colonies by November 1st and then not do any invasive meddling until the following March 1st. Apart from feeding and a mid-winter oxalic acid treatment that doesn't require removing the hive cover, there is very little, if anything, that we can do to fix any problems that may arise during winter anyway.

With my 3-legged approach, I have been extremely successful with regard to this goal. Your circumstances may vary. You may have issues that I do not ([bears?](#)). But those would be things to add to my core three concerns, not substitutes for them.

Good luck! We'll see how we all did on March 1st!

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