

Autumn Pack-down

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I will give a summary of what I generally do (with Langstroth hives), but it is by no means “the only way” and I don’t always do it in this order, others will/may do it differently.

Beekeeping in Autumn is generally a time for the beekeeper to assess their hive/s health and food stores (and supplementary feed if necessary) and the general condition of the hive for the coming cold wet months of winter. Personally I quite enjoy packing the bees down for winter making them snug in the hive with ample food stores.

As the days grow shorter, the queen is laying less and less eggs and the bee numbers in the hive are decreasing, some queens (e.g Carniolans) may cease laying all together, so before panicking that your queen has perished have a good look to see if you can find her. If you can’t locate her and the hive appears calm, she is probably there but ceased laying.

You may also see dead bees(probably Drones) out the front of the hive or see worker bees dragging Drones out of the hive. Drones are unnecessary extra mouths to feed over winter, so the girls kick them out.

Check the health of the brood, are there eggs, larvae, capped brood. Does the brood that you see look healthy? i.e Pearly white larvae, capped brood not sunken or having holes picked open by the bees because of disease.

The amount of honey stores required depends on whether you are packing down to one or two boxes. Generally speaking a single hive requires 4 frames of capped honey and a double hive requires 6-8 frames of capped honey. If any of the frames contain uncapped nectar place them next to the brood area and then place fully capped frames to the outer most positions to act as insulation.

It’s advisable to avoid feeding frames of honey to other hives unless you can be certain of the disease status of the honey you are donating to another hive.

I often get asked whether you should pack down to one or two boxes. In Gippsland it is recommended to pack down to double hives if you can. However, it all depends on the strength of your hive (bee numbers). After packing down you should see lots of bees between all the frames, so they can more easily regulate the temperature in their hive and ward off pests.

Make sure your hive is positioned/located to obtain the maximum amount of winter sun and that it is sheltered from the wind.

Scrape around the edge of the lid and boxes to remove any squashed bees/wax/propolis so they fit well together without any gaps for pests like wax moth to lay their eggs in. This also helps the bees by preventing drafts. Place a hive mat on the top bars of the frames under the lid to help them stay warm by decreasing space under the lid. Strap the hive together with an Em-lock or similar.

Decrease your entrance opening to approximately 1/3 to help bees keep the hive warm and defend against pests such as European wasps and robbing by other bees.

As the Autumn days get cooler if your hive has not got enough honey stores you can feed them 2:1 sugar syrup i.e. 2kg sugar/1 litre of water until about the end of April. Over winter if you still don't have enough honey stores you can place dry white sugar on the hive mat for them to consume. Do not feed them syrup over winter for the following reasons:

1. Syrup has more water in it than honey and bees will burn excess energy trying to remove the additional water.
2. Sugar syrup will be very cold during the winter, and if the syrup is too cold, the bees will be unable to drink it.
3. Syrup can mould easily if the bees do not consume it quickly, rendering the syrup undrinkable for the bees.
4. Cold weather may keep the bees from getting to the syrup, leaving an open window for other insects to eat the syrup.

Lift the back of your hive/s and get an idea of their weight and periodically (every few weeks) lift the hive again, which should give you an idea of how fast they are consuming their stores. If you are concerned of the weight of the hive(i.e it's very light), open the hive briefly on a sunny winter's day and place some dry white sugar on the hive mat, do not disturb bee cluster.

Once your hive is packed down don't disturb them at all till about late September early October unless completely necessary. Disturbing them over winter can lead to stress and disease such as Nosema.

Happy BeeKeeping!