

More on Feeding Bees – top bar hives

Peter Gatehouse said in his article a couple of weeks back “Hopefully you all left enough of the bee’s own honey in your hives to get them through most, if not all of late autumn, winter and early spring”.

We talk affectionately of “girls” out there foraging with honey an end product for their consumption in lean times.

Our bees work hard, and in fact work themselves to death, to store food for the periods when there is little or no nectar available. Bees are not used to eating anything but what they produce themselves. When we come along and rob the honey there is disruption to the good order of the hive.

One of the goals of top bar beekeeping is to provide as natural a lifestyle as possible for the colony. The Top Bar Hive (TBH) is designed with the ultimate compromise in mind – a hive that can be managed for honey and other hive products, but a more bee-friendly life for the bees.

In my last article I stated I leave enough honey for the winter so that I do not have to feed my bees. I would argue this should be the approach for all beekeepers, but this approach is not the real world. My goal is to always leave sufficient stores of honey and pollen in the hive, harvesting only what can safely be considered surplus. This can be an inexact science.

Honey is not sugar and cannot be substituted for anything else. It contains unique enzymes and nutrients that bees need; it also contains simple sugars that give them energy quickly. Honey also has its own pH (acidity) and the digestive system of bees is accustomed to it.

Peter pointed out the problems with feeding sugar syrup.

I don’t want to go down the sugar syrup path with my hives. But if I do find it is very difficult for the bees I have options to supply syrup in feeders suited to TBHs, either inside or fixed to the end of the hive with an access feeder hole.

The difficulty with opening a TBH in the winter is that you have to break the seals between each top bar to inspect or do whatever is required in the hive – the bees then have to reseal the break using energy and resources that may be scarce. This suggests a feeder attached to the end of the hive with inverted jars and small holes in the lids as the better option.

I believe better to follow the sugar fondant path that Peter uses on some of his hives. He explained the sugar fondant is a process breaking the sucrose molecule into glucose and fructose molecules which the bees can more readily use for energy - much like honey. I still have to determine the difference between what Ben’s Bees has on offer compared to purchase from a supermarket.

Sugar fondant options for TBHs. The sugar fondant could be applied to the follower board in the hive. This does require the seal to be broken to recharge. Second method, the sugar fondant package is placed on top of the top bars. In one bar, perhaps a little wider than the normal, drill holes to provide access for the bees. Simply cut a slot in the sugar fondant package and place over the holes, a different method but similar to the location Peter uses with his Langstroth frames.

I have said it before, ask ten beekeepers a question and you will get eleven answers – Peter has used sugar fondant explaining the benefits and I will follow his advice.

Don McLean