

## Preparing your Colonies for Winter

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The main causes of winter losses are queenless colonies, starvation, varroa and damp in the hives. All of these are within your control. Your bees are a valuable asset, and they deserve your best attention. Bees first, holiday second! You should aim to lose no more than one hive in 10 in winter. Cleaning out dead hives in spring is dismal work.

Aim to complete your winter preparation by late September. Use our Winter Prep record card to keep track of your preparation. See our web page [Beekeeping/hive records](#). Don't try to rely on your memory. These notes apply to hives that are not moved to the heather in August.

### Step 1

Mid August. Check that the colony has a laying queen. Look for eggs, larvae and sealed brood. If there is no queen, unite the colony to a queenright colony, or call for help. Your colony should have at least five deep frames of bees. I winter my hives on a brood and a half and one part-filled super of honey, with no queen excluder.

### Step 2

End of August. Remove any part-filled supers for re-fitting later. Check the weight of the hive by hefting, lifting one side from the stand. The hive should feel as if it is nailed to the hive stand. I leave all the honey in the brood box and half brood box for the bees.

If your hives feel heavy enough without feeding, go straight to step 3. A colony will need the equivalent of about 18kg of honey or sugar syrup to survive the winter. Any late honey stored in September is a bonus. Feed any light hives with a rapid feeder, preferably a Miller or Ashforth tray feeder. These allow you to feed up to 10 litres of syrup at a time. Winter feeding should take only a few days. Your hive stands must be level if using a tray feeder, or bees may drown in pools of syrup. Make the syrup with one electric kettle full of hot water to 3x1kg bags of sugar. You can buy sugar in 15x1kg packs from Bookers. Reduce the hive entrance when feeding, and feed in the evening to prevent robbing.

Aim to finish winter-feeding by early September. Feeding in early September while the weather is still warm will stimulate the queen to continue laying for a while. If you delay feeding until October, the weather may be cold, the bees will not take the feed down, and the feed will just go bad.

### Step 3

Remove the empty feeder when the hive weight is OK. Place an eke, a 25mm high square wooden frame, on the top brood box. Place a tray of Apiguard on the top brood frames, open side up, and refit the crown board on the eke, with the feed holes sealed.

If using an open mesh floor, fit the mite catch tray and put a square of old carpet or a slab of expanded polystyrene or Kingspan on the crown board. This stays on all winter.

Aim to fit your first tray of Apiguard by early September. You want a hive full of healthy bees going into the winter. If you wait until October, it's too late. You will have a hive full of bees damaged by varroa, and very little new brood to replace them.

#### Step 4

After 10 days, remove the mite catch tray and note if the mite drop is low, medium or high, compared to your other hives. Scrape the catch tray clean and refit it. Check if the Apiguard tray has been emptied. If yes, fit the second tray. Leave first tray in place, to remind you that you have fitted the second tray. If no, wait a further four days and then fit second tray.

#### Step 5

After two weeks, remove both aluminium Apiguard trays for recycling. Scrape any remaining Apiguard onto the top frames. Remove the eke and the mite catch tray. Clean and store them for winter.

**Note:** If there is a late flow of honey you may find that the eke has been filled with wild comb and honey. Remove this.

#### Step 6

Optional, same day as step 5. Fit a super of drawn combs, including any part-filled combs or combs wet from extracting, to store late season honey from Himalayan balsam or ivy. No queen excluder is needed.

#### Step 7

Remove entrance block and fit a mouse guard. If using a wooden floor, open up the feed holes in the crown board to increase ventilation.

Now you can relax and go on holiday!

*Compiled by Peter McFadden*

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