



Published in February 2015 SCBA Newsletter



Managing Your Colonies for Splitting

By David MacFawn

Here in SC the Maples bloom usually around the end of January / first of February especially along the coast. The colonies usually do not need any additional pollen since there is an abundance of pollen usually. However, if you do use pollen patties to get them to build up early you would usually not need the pollen patties until mid-February. The nectar flow starts the end of March/first of April. I guess whether you feed pollen patties depends on what you want to do with the colonies; after the flow which ends around the end of May/first of June or move them prior to the flow to say California for the Almonds. Most colonies that starve are in the March time frame which means you would probably have to feed syrup if you feed pollen patties to get them to build up early.

Colonies start swarming around the end of February/first of March in SC when the drones start flying. If you feed pollen patties and syrup you had better be ready to make splits or other swarm controls. If you want to be ready to split the end of February, then feeding pollen patties mid-January would do it.

You will have issues with SHB if you feed patties in large quantity early. I found it best to place the patty directly above the brood nest in small quantities and feed patties more often to control SHB. Also keeping the colonies in direct sunlight helps. SHB issues are usually not a large issue in January/February.

You should start feeding in mid-January if you want to split the end of February/First of March. Tough to get queens much earlier unless you want to make a "walk away split" and let the bees raise their own queen. If they raise their own queen the first workers would emerge in the middle of April. This means that you will not have many bees if you are interested in catching the nectar flow in SC (end of March/first of April thru end of May/first of June). If you feed patties/syrup too early you will be spending a lot of money keeping the bees alive and not starving. You may want to a swarm cell if you split the end of February/first of March. Some believe using swarm cell will cause smarminess in your colonies.

Steve Tabor often thought about experimenting and feeding patties/ syrup early to see if he could make a super of honey off the maples the end of January/first of February. I do not know of anyone in SC that has successfully done that.

I have never fed patties starting in November thru the winter since I wanted the bees to build up naturally in the spring to minimize swarming and also time the nectar flow starting the end of March. Usually in SC there is something blooming throughout the winter with some source of pollen coming in. I do know that if you start feeding patties/syrup mid-January your bees will be "bubbling over" the end of February.

Often the colonies will have some brood in them year round in SC with the minimum amount of brood in the November/December time frame. As usual they start building up naturally starting in December.

Should you wrap you hives in the winter?

Wrapping hives is not necessary in SC. It rarely gets into the upper teens. As long as you have plenty of bees (about 4-5 frames in December), plenty of honey for the bees to eat and produce heat you will be fine. I do not worry about the cold in SC. I do worry about the wind though and make sure I locate my yards/hives with a wind break, on the S to SE side of a hill, etc. to protect them from the wind. The temperature inside the hive is usually a few degrees warmer than outside. The bees warm the cluster and not the inside of the hive. If you do not have 6-7 frames of bees in the September time frame the weak colonies should be either requeened or combined with a strong colony.

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