

THE BEEKEEPER'S YEAR

IN PIEDMONT NORTH CAROLINA

This calendar is only a suggested checklist of events in the beekeeper's year. Weather conditions, hive locations, and the type of bees you have can and will influence your activities throughout the year. This list is meant as an overview of what's taking place in the hive each month. It also makes suggestions on various tasks the beekeeper should be doing in that month.

January

The Bees.

This month the queen is surrounded by thousands of her workers. She is in the midst of their winter cluster. There is little activity for the bees this month except maybe on a warm day (about 45-50 degrees) when the workers will take the opportunity to make cleansing flights. There are no drones left in the hive, but some worker brood will begin to appear. This month the bees will consume about 25 pounds of honey.

The Beekeeper.

Often this is a quiet month for the beekeeper. If there is a heavy snow, make certain the entrance to the hive is cleared to allow for proper ventilation. You may need to start feeding the hive this month. Once you start feeding the hive you must continue feeding until they are gathering food on their own. This is a great time to catch up on your reading about the latest buzz and to study up for that beekeeper's course you've been thinking about taking. Don't forget to attend your next club meeting and start building and repairing the equipment you might need for this coming season. Go ahead and order that package of bees, if needed, from a reputable supplier.

February

The Bees.

Early in the month, the queen is still cozy in the cluster. She will begin to lay a few more eggs each day. There are still no drones in the hive. Workers will take cleansing flights on mild days. The bees will consume about 25 pounds of food, made from a combination of honey stores and nectar from maples.

The Beekeeper.

The maple bloom begins early in the month and the beekeeper must make sure the hive is ready for it. Remember that equipment that you should have repaired last month that you put off until this month? Well, this month is here. Check the hive for sufficient food supplies, diseases, and to see if the queen is laying. More colonies are probably lost during this time of year than during all

of the other winter months. A colony that is rearing brood will consume about 10 pounds of food per week, and if the weather turns bad, a colony with small food reserves can quickly starve to death. Never allow the food stores to drop below 15 pounds. **If they have less than 15 pounds of honey, start feeding them stored honey or sugar water (One part sugar to one part water.)** Remember, once you start feeding, you need to continue feeding until they are bringing their own food supplies in. Go ahead and make sure that you've signed up for that "Advanced Beekeeper Course" you've been saying you were going to start. Attend your bee club meetings and get your equipment ready for spring.

The Red Maples should start to bloom around the 1st of this month and will end around the 12th of March

March

The Bees.

With the days becoming longer, the queen steadily increases her rate of egg laying. More brood means more food will be consumed. The drones begin to appear. The bees will continue to consume honey stores. They will also bring in a fair amount of pollen in during this month.

The Beekeeper.

On a nice sunny day at the beginning of the month, when there is no wind and the bees are flying, have a quick look inside your hive. Any temperature above 65 degrees should be fine for a short period of time. If the temperatures are cooperating there should not be any problem removing the frames for a quick inspection. Inspect for disease and see that the queen is laying once the nectar flow has started. Colony populations are high in preparation of the coming poplar flow, but food stores can run dangerously low until the flow starts. It may be necessary to continue feeding the hive. If the weather is starting to look good, remove the entrance reducer. If it's still bad weather, leave it in place until April. In mid to late March you may consider reversing the hive deeps. This will allow for a better distribution of the brood, and stimulate the growth of the colony.

Sugar Maples and Dandelions will start blooming this month.

April

The Bees.

The weather is starting to improve, and the early blossoms are beginning to appear. The bees are continuing to bring pollen into the hive. The queen is laying eggs, and the population is growing fast.

The Beekeeper.

This is a critical month for Piedmont beekeepers. Place honey supers on top of the top deep around the 3rd or 4th week in April. On a warm and still day, do a complete inspection of the hive. Can you find any evidence of the queen? Are there plenty of eggs and brood? Is there a nice pattern to her egg laying? The final touches should be put on new hives and supers that will soon be full of bees and honey. Package bees should be installed as early as possible this month to take advantage of the poplar flow. Watch out for swarming, especially if you didn't follow your friend's advice from the bee club and left that queen excluder in place. Alsike Clover, Blackberries, Crimson Clover, Ladino (White Clover), Tulip Poplar, Black Gum, Black Locust, Vetch, Holly, and Raspberries, will be blooming this month.

May

The Bees.

Now the hive is really buzzing. The nectar and pollen should begin to come into the hive thick and fast. This is the peak of the egg laying season for the queen. The hive should be bursting with busy buzzing bees.

The Beekeeper.

Inspect the hive weekly. Attend your bee club meetings and any workshops you can find.

Swarming may occur this month.

Keep your fingers crossed in anticipation of a great harvest.

This month Privet, Persimmon, and Sweet Clover will be in bloom.

June

The Bees.

Hives that haven't swarmed will be boiling with bees. The queen's rate of egg laying may drop a little bit this month.

The Beekeeper.

Inspect the hives weekly to make certain the hives are healthy and the queen is there doing her job. Supers full of poplar honey may be removed. If you want to, you may increase your hives by splitting strong colonies. There should be no need to add more honey supers this month. Keep watching for swarming which may still occur.

This month the Sourwood blooms. But, if you want to get any Sourwood honey you and the girls need to pack-up and take a road trip to the mountains.

July

The Bees.

On hot and humid nights, you may see a huge curtain of bees cooling themselves on the exterior of the hive.

The Beekeeper.

June and July are harvest months for the piedmont beekeeper. Continue inspections to the hive to make sure your hive is healthy.

Heartsease and Smartweed bloom this month.

August

The Bees.

The colony's growth is slowing down. Drones are still around, but the workers will soon lose interest in feeding them. The outside activity is beginning to slow down as the nectar flow decreases.

The Beekeeper.

There is not much chance of swarming this month. Watch out for honey robbing by wasps or other bees.

You can do a fall re-queening this month or in early September. Queens may be a little less expensive this time of year.

September

The Bees.

The hive population is dropping. The queen's egg laying is significantly reduced, and the drones may begin to disappear this month.

The Beekeeper.

It's time to do that final harvest for the season. Remember to leave at least 40 pounds of honey for the hive to get through the winter. Check on the queen. If you are going to, feed and medicate towards the end of the month. (Only the first 2 gallons is medicated if you are using it.) Add the Apistan strips if you are using them. (Remember, Apistan strips stay in for 42 days.)

You can also add the menthol for mite control. Feeding continues until the bees will take no more syrup. It's a good idea to get some advice on "alternating medications" to keep pests from developing immunity to them. All medications will vary in monthly usage. Attend your bee club meetings to see how your bee buddies are doing.

The Aster blooms late this month.

October

The Bees.

Not much activity going on in the hive now. The bees are settling down for the winter.

The Beekeeper.

There is not too much work for the beekeeper this month, but keep an eye on your hive.

Watch out for robbing this month. Install inner cover wedges for ventilation.

Finish feeding for the winter. Remove the Apistan strips if you used them, assuming you have had them in for 42 days. This is a good month to combine weak hives. It's better to take losses in the fall.

Attend your bee club meeting.

November

The Bees.

The cold weather will send the bees into a cluster.

The Beekeeper.

There is even less to do in the hive this month. It's time to add that entrance reducer to the hive to keep field mice from nesting inside. Store your equipment away for the winter.

Attend your bee club meetings. Sit around and lie to your friends about how you did this past season.

December

The Bees.

The bees are in a tight cluster now.

The Beekeeper.

There is nothing you can do with the bees this month. No peeking. Opening the hive this month could injure your girls. Read a good book on beekeeping, study the latest reports on their health.

Be thinking about what worked well for you this season and what, if anything, you might want to change next year. Enjoy the holidays, and spend some quality time with your friends and family.

Sources: Back Yard Beekeepers Association in Southwestern Connecticut.
NCSBA Calendar of Beekeeping by John T. Ambrose and Caroline L. Ambrose
Members of the Guilford County Beekeepers Association
N.C. Cooperative Extension Service: Honey Plants of North Carolina
N.C. State Beekeepers Association: North Carolina Honey Plants