

Swansea & District Beekeepers Gwenynwyr Abertawe a'r Cylch Newsletter

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Editor: D. Salkild

Let's use Attractive Labels.

My son-in-law, who is currently working in Germany, bought some pots of honey from a beekeeping colleague there and has said that he will pass one to me when he can travel more easily after the Covid lockdown. He knows we like to taste different honeys from around the world. He sent a photo of the jar on 'WhatsApp' and I liked the professional look of it.



It struck me that when someone is buying honey, or for that matter, anything else in a bottle or jar, they have no way of knowing the taste, flavour, consistency etc. until they actually open it. So logically someone buying a jar of honey will tend to go for the one that, in their mind, looks the most appealing.

Honey, as we know can be bought as a grocery, as a gift, as a luxury food or for medicinal purposes. Our local honey is special and deserves the best possible presentation. This is where the shape and size of the container and the quality of the label are so important. We must always bear this in mind when marketing our honeys. D. S.

What the Papers say.

Never mind the Telegraph, Mail or Times, when beekeeping features in the **South Wales Evening Post** you know that it has arrived at last!

On Friday 18th June, with a headline of 'Un-bee-lievable' (their spelling) it reported that Swansea is the tenth best city in the U.K. for urban beekeeping, according to a study by Direct2Florest (no, I've never heard of them either). The study took into consideration a number of factors including air quality, local council conservation efforts, university bee support schemes, local beekeeping associations, number of allotment sites and plots, etc. etc.

London topped the table with 95 points and Swansea was tenth with 76 points. The paper reported that the managing director of Direct2Florest said, "Beekeeping has always been considered a rural activity, and it's great to see urban beekeeping on the rise across U.K."

Coming back to the national newspapers, there was an obituary in **The Daily Telegraph** for the late Colin Butler, who died recently aged 102 years. Colin worked at Rothamsted Experimental Research Station and in the 1950s isolated the pheromone we know as 'queen substance', a chemical signal which not only controls the behaviour of workers but is also a sexual attractant to drones. From his experiments he was

able to determine that the pheromone, produced in the mandibular glands, was transmitted in the hive by contact with the queen, not by emitting an odour, as had previously been thought.

Other items in **The Daily Telegraph** recently include an article about red mason bees and a company who distributes them throughout the U.K. for pollination purposes. According to the article, red mason bees are the only bees legally allowed to be kept on allotments because they don't sting. They make their nests in tubes where each cell is made of mud – so a source of damp soil is vital. Female eggs are laid in individual cells in the middle of the tube with male cells at the ends. The males emerge first in spring. According to the article, they are ideal pollinators in gardens and in orchards.

In May, several newspapers reported that beekeepers were being urged to avoid foreign bred queens and to breed their own. According to the articles, some 21,405 queens were imported last year, mainly from Italy and Greece, with 363 colonies imported from Italy.

As I have mentioned in the past, importation of queens is not a new development. In my booklet “Modern Bee – Keeping” a Handbook for Cottagers”, published by the BBKA in 1882, Thomas H. Blow, a manufacturer of hives in Welywn, Hertfordshire, advertises ‘Foreign bees a Speciality’. The advert goes on to say that stocks of queens of Cyprian, Syrian, Carniolan, or Ligurian bees can be supplied.

This was some 20 years before the ‘Isle of Wight Disease’ was first reported in 1904. That disease, nowadays thought to be caused by Chronic Bee Paralysis Virus, decimated British and Irish bee colonies and necessitated importation to rebuild stocks.

Coming back to today's reports however, most authorities recognise that locally adapted bees survive our cool, damp British winters better than imports from warmer Mediterranean climates, though these foreign bees are prolific honey gatherers in the warm, settled weather which we don't often get in Britain.

The articles point out that the native ‘black bees’ fly in colder temperatures and make smaller colonies, hence are able to survive winter with less stores than bees from warmer climates.

If you are considering buying colonies or re-queening, do try your best to get locally adapted bees, the dark ones if they are available. It will be to your benefit in the long run.

In the “Letters Column” of the Daily Telegraph, on 18th June, were two responses to previous articles about lawns. The first writer said that his garden was alive with bees except for the area which had been left to grow wild. The second followed in similar fashion, indicating that his neatly cropped lawn is surrounded by buddleia, ceanothus, lavender, sage, salvia, poppies, as well as fruit trees, all of which are bee and insect friendly. He is rather tired of “wild lawn” enthusiasts telling him how to maintain an insect friendly garden. When my garden goes “wild” it is usually because I just haven't got round to looking after it properly!

D. S.

Adding Supers

The honey flow has started. Depending on the forage available in your area expect the flow to continue through July and, in some areas, into August. Remember to check your hives regularly to see if more supers are needed. I usually add another when the previous super is about three quarters full.

In a good honey flow, a strong colony can easily add thirty pounds of honey in a week so watch carefully and have your new supers readily available. If you expect to be away, for instance on holiday, then use your discretion and maybe put two empty supers on, but only if you'll be away for a while.

The honey flow doesn't always come to an end early. I remember one year when our then Secretary, the late Mr. Mike Cram, extracted his supers at the end of August and put them back on the hive for clean-up. To his surprise and delight, they were filled up again, this time with Himalayan Balsam, which is quite a nice honey.

Coming back to extra supers, use drawn comb if you have it or use new foundation. In a good honeyflow, bees will draw out foundation very quickly anyway. In the past I have experimented with unwired comb, putting just a slim strip, about 2cm wide, at the top of a frame and letting the bees draw it down. This has

worked well for me (and the bees), but only in a good honeyflow. To ensure they didn't draw it down in a random fashion, I sandwiched frames with starter strips between frames of drawn comb. Surprisingly, these unwired frames worked well in the extractor, without breaking up.

One word of caution here. Make sure the supers are not too high as lifting heavy supers at heights above your waist can strain you back. If they look as though they will go too high, take them off and store them for later extraction.

On the question of lifting heavy supers, if you can't manage it on your own, get someone to give you a hand or simply take the frames out individually so that you don't have to handle the entire weight of a super at one time.

Some years ago, whilst harvesting my crop, I put three Langstroth supers on my (single wheeled) wheelbarrow to take them up to the house for extraction. That was a big mistake. Not only was the wheelbarrow almost impossible to steer but it collapsed under the weight of them. Well, carrying about 120 lb. was just too much for it. The moral is not to overload anything, work within your own capabilities.



Some hives on an old farmhouse in the village of La Clusaz in the French Alps.

When we were on holiday in France a few years ago, I spotted these hives high on the side of an old farmhouse. At first, I wondered how the beekeeper managed to check them, let alone put extra supers on them, then I realised that they were like the hives in a bee-house, built into the structure of the house and accessible from the rear. Incidentally, some of those alpine meadow honeys are dark, very viscous and delicious.

Do keep an eye on your colonies and do be careful when lifting supers.

D. S.

“When Bees were Bees” by Tom Davies.

Southern California in the U.S.A. has many attributes, among which in 1931 were members of the sage family providing nectar for bees.

Three sages were described in “Gleanings in Bee Culture” for May 1931, sent to the magazine by a Mr. L. L. Andrews of Corona, California.

First described was the purple sage, mostly grown in northern Los Angeles and Ventura counties. It has a stem something like the white sage, with purple blossoms, produces a beautiful white honey and bloom in May and June.

Second was the black sage, growing from Mexico well up into Monterey County, leaves not unlike the garden sage, a bush about four feet high in flower from February to July in good seasons. The blossoms issue from a button-like growth on shoots, are white at first, ageing to pinkish, producing a delicious white honey.

The third described was the white sage, grown mostly in southern Riverside and Diego Counties, reputed to survive fire hazards, white blossoms similar to snapdragons, meaning that bees have to open the blooms with their front legs to get at the nectar. It blooms from the end of June and through July and August, producing a near white honey.

All of these honeys taste delicious and I have a fairly large garden sage here so when it is in flower I will have a look at how the bees manage its flowers.

Till next time, Tom.

Minimum Numbers.

I was recently asked the question, “What is the minimum number of bees needed to keep a colony viable?”. To be quite honest, I had never been asked before, couldn't answer, so thought that I would look it up on-line. That was easier said than done. There were numerous options available and the most sense I could get was that somewhere between 5000 and 10,000 workers, with a mated queen were needed. Others put it at two frames of bees, and others again suggested 2 lb. of bees, both with a mated queen. Take your pick!

Then, of course, we must consider **Mini-Nucs**, mostly used for raising and mating queens. They can manage for a short while with just a cupful of workers, but only for a limited time. Once the queen is seen to be laying well, she is transferred to a larger colony.

I sometimes wonder how a small cast survives when they swarm late in the season. The queen needs to mate and the colony needs to expand enough to have a workforce able to collect and store its winter supplies. Some do survive but I feel that a number don't make it. D. S.

My Inspection Follow-up.

Once again, I am reporting on my two colonies. You will remember that in the last newsletter, I had managed to damage the queen in one of the colonies but there was an emergency queen cell in the hive. Well, sadly nothing came of it and when I opened it a few weeks later, I found that the colony had laying workers in it.

I mulled over the option of combining the colony with the other but, fearful that they might damage the good queen, I decided against combining. This decision may be right or wrong and I would appreciate hearing from members who have been in the same position themselves. It will make an interesting follow-up article.

You might ask why did I leave it so long before checking up on them. This was because, in my experience, it is best to give a new queen time to hatch, mate and start laying before disturbing a colony. Again, others may have different points of view which I would be glad to hear about.

The second colony is looking good and has more than half filled it's super, so, as I won't be there for a while, I added another to the hive.

If fine weather continues through July, we could be in for a bumper crop of honey this year. Let's hope so.
D. S.

"More About Bees" by Tom Davies

The 9th of June, a murky day, picking to rain at times, totally unlike yesterday when I was out in the garden in shirtsleeves, in lovely sunshine doing some weeding.

With that chilly weather during May, it held up the planting out of dahlias and French marigolds that I had grown from seed, but now that summer has finally arrived, they have been planted out and are making headway. Flowers are opening on them and I am looking for a good display.

The clover is opening out and plenty of bees are working them, a few honeybees too, so although the winter was a fairly cold, long one, it does not seem as though it was a bad one for bees in general.

I left some kale to flower in the kitchen garden and it was worked on well by bees, they seemed to appreciate it. It is coming to an end now and in the next few days it should finish altogether.

The kitchen garden is fairly tidy and my runner beans are just beginning to climb the sticks. They were raised in the greenhouse and planted out later as the soil was very slow in warming up. Also, I have beetroot coming along nicely, so I am looking forward to some nice meals later on! I hope that the season will be good for your bees with no losses.

Till next time, Tom.

Ed. My thanks to those who send me these interesting articles and newspaper cuttings.

The next newsletter is due out on 1st Sept. 2021. Please let me have your articles / items by **20th Aug.** Many thanks.

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