



Survivor Stock - by David Papke

“I’ve been encouraged in recent years by the number of beekeepers who appear to be successfully keeping locally-adapted stocks of bees without treatment for varroa. I am a strong supporter of their efforts, and see them as the wave of the future.” - Randy Oliver

There is a growing division in the beekeeping community between commercial and hobby/sideline beekeepers. This division is primarily based on different approaches to managing colonies of honey bees and it is not hard to understand considering the number of colonies involved. Commercial beekeepers manage multiple apiaries with hundreds, even thousands of colonies; whereas, small-scale or hobby beekeepers usually manage a single apiary with fewer than 20 colonies. The sheer numbers of colonies involved determines not only the kind of management required but also, significantly, the kind of bee desired. Commercial beekeepers want queens that produce yellow bees (Italian hybrids) bred for their temperament and productivity. They will requeen their colonies often (sometimes several times in a single year) and they will feed their colonies often and treat their colonies often (for mites and AFB primarily). These are the bees/queens produced by the majority of queen/bee breeders in the U.S.

In contrast, most sideline/hobby beekeepers are looking for another kind of bee. Certainly temperament and productivity are important, but primarily these beekeepers want bees that survive without treatments for mites or AFB and without having to feed excessively. They are looking for what has become known as “survivor stock.” Mind you, this is not a bee that one just puts in a box and forgets about. Honey bees need to be managed as they are dependent upon us to optimize the conditions under which they live. But “survivor stock” implies bees that can withstand sometimes harsh, challenging conditions: weather and climate change, predation by parasites and pests, competition for resources, viruses and pathogens, not to mention toxins and pesticides. These can be hard on bees!

Although many colonies succumb to one factor or another, there exist colonies that not only survive, but thrive! Perhaps you’ve seen one (I hope so); they’re out there. These are the bees we wish we could keep. These are the queens we wish we could buy or raise. Well, we can! As Randy Oliver points out, locally-adapted survivor stock is the future of beekeeping. And we can help create that future with the bees we have right now. We begin by learning how to propagate the locally-adapted survivor stock we already own. And by requeening with queens bred with survivor traits. It won’t happen in one season or over several seasons but it is a path in the right (sustainable) direction.