

# Susquehanna Beekeeper's Association

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## President's Message

The warmer weather sure is welcome for both the bees and the beekeepers! The long and cold winter certainly took its toll on our bee colonies. Even more reason to put into practice this year what we learned from Joe Lewis at our April meeting; planning and timing is a key to sustaining your apiary.

I came out of the winter with one survivor hive which I plan to build several nucs from. As extra insurance I ordered a bee package this year. Instead of shaking the bees from the package into the hive body, I tried a gentler approach for both me and the bees. After hanging the queen cage between 2 frames and shaking a few bees out I placed the package on its side on top of the frames inside an empty hive body. The next day I removed the empty package with a few dead bees. As

like many things in beekeeping there are several ways to get the same result.



I was glad to see the interest in the Hands-on Beekeeping Workshop with Dave Papke. It will be a great opportunity to learn from an experienced beekeeper and

improve your hive management skills. The SBA is also scheduling on-site demonstrations for summer 2015. If you are interested in sharing your apiary for a couple of hours please contact me.

The 2015 Beekeeping Short Course finished with 41 students. Thank you to Cybil Preston for teaching an excellent course. I am looking forward to seeing many new beekeepers at our meetings.

See you at the 13 May and 10 June meetings.

-Harry

# To Treat or Not to Treat, That is the Question!



BY TIM MCMAHON

*With this article, I don't want to start an argument about what is right or wrong. I just want to put down in words the progression I went through as a beekeeper with my dealings with Varroa mites.*

beekeeper. That fourth year I started three more hives from packages, for a total of 12 colonies. Now feeling really good about myself, I launched into a plan to make my own nucs from my colonies after the nectar flow ended.

Starting out as a hobbyist beekeeper, I did not want to use any chemicals on my bees or hive. As a first time beekeeper, I wanted to go with the mantra of "live and let die" and try to help the bees find their own middle ground with Varroa mites. My first year, I had two hives started from nucs, one even swarmed in June. Both of these two hives made it through the first winter without any mite treatments, and I started two more hives from nucs. All four hives went into the winter and all four came out, still without any mite treatments. My third year, I added five more

So there I was at the beginning of July with a total of 20 colonies. Now is where I find out that a little bit of knowledge can be very dangerous. Without going into the whole story, let me just say that my first try at making nucs did not go well. Not really having the experience needed or a clear plan, I made a complete mess of things. I came home one day to a sight I hope none of you ever have to see as a beekeeper. The robbing situation was beyond repair. So I went into my fourth winter with 13 colonies, still never having done a Varroa mite treatment, and without a colony loss due to mites (the only losses were due to my lack of skill at making nucs and managing my apiary for robbing).

hives from packages. I went into my third winter with nine healthy colonies and still had not done any Varroa mite treatments. All nine of these colonies came out of that third winter without any problems. At this point, I was in my fourth year with no losses ever and no Varroa mite treatments ever, and I was sure that I was a great

Now we get to the not-so-good part. During my fourth winter, I lost 11 out of my 13 hives. I was beside myself. I took samples of bees and comb up to the Belts-

"...I was sure that I was a great beekeeper..."



# To Treat or Not to Treat, That is the Question!

ville Bee Lab, and it all tested negative for Nosema, tracheal mites and American Foulbrood. Bart Smith from the Bee Lab, said, in a manner that he must have told thousands of beekeepers before, that it was most likely Varroa mites and the viruses that they vector. So in my fifth year, starting over with two overwintered hives and 13 more starting from packages, I swore that things would be different. I decided to try some of the less intrusive Varroa mite integrated pest management treatments. I added some drone brood frames in the spring, and I froze the frames when they were mostly filled with capped drone brood. Then also in that fifth year I used the food grade beta acid treatment called Hopguard in the month of August. I did one combine before the winter starts, but I believed I was taking 14 healthy hives into the winter. Once again I'm shown how little I know and come to the worst possible outcome. I lost all 14 hives. Again the Beltsville Bee Lab tells me that Varroa mites most likely got them. I've now gone from the best beekeeper of all times to the worst beekeeper of all time. Not being shy about telling my story to people, I have had several people note that the Bee Informed Partnership (BIP) data also shows that formulation of Hopguard treatments do not show very favorable results (there is a new Hopguard product out there now that I've not tried yet).

So now after two winters of terrible results, I'm ready to try almost anything to keep at least some of my bees alive. I order 16 packages and before I even install them, I spray them with an oxalic acid sugar water spray using the method outlined and approved by the Canadian government. Then last summer, in August, I treat the 16 hives with Mite Away Quick Strips (a formic acid treatment). As the fall of 2014 sets in, I

combine some of my weak hives and take 13 colonies into the winter. Just after the New Year, I apply an oxalic acid vapor treatment to the hives. Things are looking good until February shows up and we end up with four plus weeks of single digit temps almost every day. Now that the flowers are starting to bloom, I've got 11 out of the 13 hives through the winter. These are the kind of numbers I was hoping for. I still can't say that my treatments are what made a difference here, but it backs up what Prof. Dennis van Engeldorp's group shows. The BIP data indicates beekeepers who do not treat suffer about 40% losses each winter, but those that are applying multiple Varroa treatments a year (mostly commercial beekeepers) are seeing about 20% losses each winter.

The way Dennis van Engeldorp puts this is that in the field of epidemiology, if you could show a 50% drop in the mortality rate of cancer with a specific treatment, as we are seeing with the Varroa treatments on honey bees, you would be able to claim a cure for cancer! A 50% drop in hive losses should make one stop and think about the pros and cons of treating for Varroa mites. Looking at the data gathered by the Bee Informed Partnership and what has been published in the scientific journals, it seems clear to me that using treatments, such as those mentioned above, is the only way to see better results in survival of overwintered colonies. Clearly the issues facing our beloved bees is very complicated and full variables (such as loss of quality forage, excessive use of pesticides in our environment, and the added stresses of the way we keep our bees and the way in which we use monoculture). There are no silver bullets in the fight against Varroa mites.



## Notes from the Apiary: April



*“I found drones  
and lots of  
drone cells. I  
had a drone  
laying queen!”*

Finally the weather is great! I got into all of my hives on April 6<sup>th</sup>. My mother hive was so strong (with brood in both boxes) that I added another deep box on top along with a queen excluder under it. There were several frames with capped honey in the bottom box so I did a reversal after placing two of those frames into one of my nucs. Nice problem to have, doing swarm control this early in April.

I then went on to the second hive. Now I had a problem, as I found drones and lots of drone cells. I had a drone laying queen! I left the hive open and went on to the third hive, where I found a beautiful full pattern of cells some in both boxes. I looked for a frame with eggs as well as cells in all stages of brood and placed it into the second hive. I went back through the second hive until I found the drone laying queen and removed her. Now the bees have a chance to raise a new queen and there should be enough drones to take care of the mating. This is why it is so important to get into your hives as soon as possible in the spring.

I closed up the third hive after reversing so that the top box had several frames of honey. I will have to keep a close eye on this hive as it will soon need another box on top to prevent swarming. Having two hives in this condition is just what I need to do splits for increases of nucs and standard

BY ROBERT CROUSE

hives. I noted that there was plenty of new pollen in these hives.

Next I went to check on my three nucs; all were well and I found and marked each queen. The one nuc that had seemed to be weak is coming along nicely. There was plenty of brood and lots of pollen and sugar water stores. I removed the top nuc boxes to get all of the bees into one box. I sold all of the nucs by April 11.

I checked a week later to see if the second hive had made any queens from the eggs I gave them. Nothing doing, they just completed feeding the eggs and larva, capped it all over. At least now they will have a nice group of new workers as both sides of this frame are filled. I pulled a frame with eggs from the mother hive and added it to the second hive; perhaps now that they have been queenless for a week they will get some queen cells started.

I contacted my queen supplier up in Hellam, PA. to see if it was possible to get the queens I ordered for late June a little earlier. No luck as it is still too cold up there for drone or queen production. Now I will have to keep a close eye on my bees and start doing splits as soon as there are enough mature drones for mating.

# Reminders, Odds and Ends

- May 13th, 2015 (Wednesday) at 7 p.m. - SBA General Meeting - Peter Lindtner, Author of Garden Plants for Honey Bees Author will have books for sale at meeting.
- June 10th, 2015 (Wednesday) at 7 p.m. - SBA General Meeting - Kristen Traynor, Author of "Two million blossoms: discovering the medicinal benefits of honey" Ms. Traynor will be giving 2 presentations: One on varroa mites and second of natural beekeeping. Each presentation will last roughly 30 to 40 minutes.
- Contact Pam or Rita Kryglik if you have any interest in volunteering to decorate a bee-themed float for the Bel Air 4th of July Parade (susquehannabeekeepers@gmail.com).  
...additional info is on the SBA website home page.

## *Claudia's Corner*

*"I realized a box of honey was a discrete little snapshot of place. The idea that you put a hive of bees down on some land and they capture the weather there, the plant life, the topography, each a snapshot in time, summer wildflowers or fall blossoms; it's all reflected in the honey. Every person who picks up that jar sees something a little different. They may have a special attachment to someplace, a farm history with Grandad. It's pretty powerful, really a reflection of people and a place. Some people are totally blown away that honey can taste so good and be so different, that land had an impact on it at all."*

*Brian Fredrickson - as quoted in "Bee Time"*

## Susquehanna Beekeepers Association

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