Management, Production and Exhibiting of Heather Honey (No.6)

GEORGE VICKERY

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Apart from wishing to provide interest and pleasure for Beekeepers, the National Honey Show has the serious aim of raising the standards of production of honey and all other bee-produce.

With this objective in view, leading; authorities have been invited to write for our Schedules on a number of subjects and their work is here available for more general distribution. We wish to thank all our contributors, they are leading exponents of their skills, we have, however, to make it clear that the advice which they give is their own individual method, we feel sure that they would be the first to encourage new alternative ways of preparation with a view to continual advancement and progress within the Craft.

Hon. General Secretary
NATIONAL HONEY SHOW

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Mr. George Vickery, the author of this article, with the assistance of his wife, runs some 400 colonies for honey production and pollination. They supply bees for fruit pollination in Kent, Somerset and Dorset and for bean pollination in Dorset. They have specialised in the production of Heather Honey from the New Forest area and, have made their living solely from bees during the last few years. Mr. Vickery, a member of the Bee Farmers' Association, has been Secretary of the East Dorset B.K.A. for the past eighteen years.

MANAGEMENT, PRODUCTION AND EXHIBITING OF HEATHER HONEY

by GEORGE VICKERY

Introduction

Like all other aspects of honey production, a system of management and attention to detail can make "Going to the Heather" a much more rewarding pursuit. Financially, heather honey fetches a much higher price, and so it should, in view of the trouble and inconvenience caused in its processing. To obtain the best results, stocks should be prepared well in advance of the flow.

Equipment

It may be helpful to the reader if I briefly summarise what I use: Single brood chamber National Hives with normal floors. Queen excluders are used throughout. Perforated Zinc screens are used for moving the bees, being replaced one the site by normal crownboards and covered by an 18in. square of expanded polystyrene ceiling tile. A supply of "binder twine" is useful for tying up the hive against removal of the roof by wind. Some form of fencing is required to guard against interference by sheep. Barbed wire and fencing stakes are possibly the easiest and most convenient to obtain. All the hives are given a reduced entrance by screwing different coloured plastic disc entrances over the centre of the existing entrances at the front of the ,hives below the brood boxes. The space on either side of this is closed by using perforated zinc. These discs by turning round and secured by a pin make quick and efficient entrance closure.

Management

Normally at the end of July, nearing the end of the main flow of flower honeys, clover, lime, etc., the colony will have a Queen that has passed the peak of her laying and a reduction of brood rearing will follow, resulting in a drop in the adult bee population and a decreasing brood nest allowing surplus room for honey storage. For the heather these are disadvantages but both can be counteracted by re-Queening with a young mated Queen of the current season.

For heather honey production it is advised that stocks should be on a single brood chamber, eleven British Standard deep frames are ideally suited. The end of June or early July would be about the right time to introduce the new Queen and so give a prolonged and sustained period of high brood rearing, whereby the brood chamber will be kept full of brood forcing the bees to store honey in the supers. Oaf equal importance is the boost this will ultimately give to the rearing of young bees for wintering to counteract the high death rate of bees working the heather.

The same time is also ideal for reducing stocks on two deep brood boxes or on one deep and a shallow box to a single deep box.

It is not necessary to find the Queen to do this.

Once the bees have been subdued and the roof, supers and Queen excluder removed, two frames are removed from the bottom box and placed in a nucleus hive and covered over. This leaves an empty space in which bees can be shaken. The frames in the top box are removed one by one and the bees dislodged into the empty space. If the Queen was in the top box she would thus be shaken down with the bees. When the combs have been shaken, as much sealed brood as possible is placed above the excluder. This minimises the risk of Queen cells being started and also means, that as the brood hatches, room is made available for honey storage. This sealed brood would naturally be placed in the centre of the brood box, the remaining space being filled with combs of stores.

The two frames in the nucleus hive are then replaced, and the hive re-assembled. The Queen excluder is placed above the single brood box containing the Queen, young brood and eggs, and the shaken brood box, and supers are put above the excluder in that order and finally the roof.

After twenty-one days (if no drone brood was present) all the brood in the top shaken brood box will have hatched, and if weather conditions have been suitable, it will now assume the role of a super and probably be filled with honey.

Production

Due to its thixotropic nature the processing of heather honey is somewhat different from that of ordinary flower honey. This means that honey supers must be removed and heather supers substituted.

A few days before the intended move to the heather, remove the honey supers, add the heather super above the Queen excluder, a clearer board with escapes and then replace the honey supers. Usually after about two days, the bees will have deft the honey supers, which can then be removed and the clearer board replaced with a travelling screen.

Combs of sealed honey can now be extracted and the combs of unsealed honey given to other stocks to finish off. Alternatively the combs of unsealed honey can be stored, and given back to the bees on return from the heather to be cleaned up. These unsealed combs should be retained in a bee-proof building to prevent setting up robbing.

The writer's heather supers consist of two frames of drawn comb, to encourage the bees into the super, the remaining frames being fitted with either sheets of extra thin foundation or "starters".

"Starters" can take .the form of a one inch strip, or a diagonal piece of foundation, fixed to the top bar of the frame. By using "starters" virgin wax is used by the bees in the manufacture of the cells, this more palatable if the end product is being sold as cut comb.

Heather is ideally suited for those who prefer section production. The problem of pressing is dispensed with and the crop is produced directly in a saleable form. Furthermore at the time of the year when Heather blooms, swarming is extremely rare; particularly if new queens have been given.

As the nights during August and early September are sometimes rather chilly, the outer end rows of the section rack are blanked off, so that a '32' section rack would have a maximum capacity of 24 sections. Warm packing on the top of the section rack (a polystyrene tile) helps encourage the bees to draw out the sections.

If second supers or section racks are needed, these are added above the existing. This ensures as far as possible that the frames in the first super are filled before the second super is started on.

Moving

Before moving to the heather which as best carried out between sunset and sunrise, when conditions are cool and the bees quiet, the hive parts must be securely fixed together. A single tape of nylon, fitted and tensioned by means of a hand strapping machine is quick, simple and inexpensive to use. Much more satisfactory than the use of copper staples, etc., which damage the woodwork. One final word about moving. Remember other beekeepers may be moving to the same area, so do ensure your bees are healthy, especially in respect of Foul Brood diseases.

Once the stocks are on the heather set the hives out in an irregular pattern to avoid drifting and minimise the transmission of disease. The different coloured plastic discs mentioned under "equipment" are also useful in serving as "markers" for returning foragers. If at all possible, find a sheltered site, to give the bees some protection against high winds, when they are returning to the hive fully laden.

Processing Heather Honey

As previously mentioned, heather honey has to be processed in a different manner to run honey. It can be spun out, providing the cells are uncapped and the honey agitated by means of a perfor-extractor. The uncapped frame is laid flat on a rack and the perfor-extractor, which consists of a wooden block fitted with rigid needles is pierced through the midrib and waggled about. Both sides of the comb are so treated. This has the effect of rendering the heather honey temporarily fluid, so that it can be extracted in the usual way, by means of a tangential honey extractor. This is a rather tedious and slow task and is only suitable for those with a small number of hives.

It should be noted that as the perfor-extractor goes right through the midrib from both sides, combs being extracted in this manner should be double wired. Two horizontal wires .threaded through the side bars and embedded into the wax should suffice, in addition to the normal manufacturers wiring.

Although wasteful, most beekeepers still press out the heather honey. To avoid the crushing of drawn comb which is a valuable asset for ordinary flower honey production “starters” should be used as suggested for cut comb production. Wax built by the bees on “starters” collapses and squeezes more easily in the heather press thus enabling more efficient use to be made of the press. It is essential in all stages of processing heather honey to work in a warm atmosphere of about 90°F. It is also advantageous if the honey can be pre-heated in a thermostatically controlled warming cabinet not exceeding 95°F, otherwise the comb will be rendered too soft and may collapse.

Heather presses are available in various forms and sizes, but the basic principle of use is the same. The comb is first cut from .the frame, then into pieces approximately the same size as the press and wrapped in muslin. This in turn is sandwiched between two metal grids, and the whole, sandwiched between two corrugated boards. By turning a handle connected to a screw thread, pressure is applied, forcing the honey through the muslin. While the honey is still warm it is run off into 281b. tins. Another method is to scrape the comb down to the midrib, wrap in the muslin and proceed as before.

During the pressing process, bits of wax and debris are collected in the honey, which now has to be strained again. Due to the nature of the honey, this straining poses problems. This is where a thermostatically controlled cabinet again comes in useful. The 281b. tins of honey are placed in the cabinet and warmed to 120’F. This takes around 24 hours.

The writer makes a simple strainer from a 71b. honey tin with the bottom removed so that it is in effect a large tube. To the bottom of this tube, a **short** length of nylon stocking (no ladders) is securely tied in position. The strainer is supported by means of a grid fixed to the top of the ripener, and the warmed honey passed through. Any honey which fails to pass through can be carefully “milked out” with a gloved hand. The strained honey can now be bottled while still warm, or run into 281b. tins for storage. On no account should heather honey be heated above 120°F or the appearance and flavour will be permanently damaged.

Exhibition Hints

When bees first go on the heather there may be an overlap with other flora. Combs for pressing for the show bench should be selected from those filled by the bees sometime after being moved. Process the selected combs first, before the press picks up to many pieces of wax debris etc. Avoid excessive heating or the honey will assume a muddy appearance and the flavour will resemble caramel.

When bottled, there should be a good even distribution of air bubbles. Examine for small black specks and particles of wax and fish out with a thin needle or wire.

A pound of heather honey takes up a greater space than run honey, so do ensure that the jars are well filled and contain a pound of honey.

Preparing for Winter

When the honey has been removed and the hives returned from the heather, a thorough check should be made that the brood is healthy and that all are Queenright. If prolific Queens have been used, stores in the broodchambers will be at a minimum so feeding must be resorted to urgently. Thick syrup, 2lbs. sugar dissolved in 1 pint of water by heating, should be given until around 40lbs. of stores are present. The addition of Fumidil “B” to this feed assists in combating nosema. This feeding should be concluded as quickly as possible by using rapid type feeders. Reduced entrances are advisable when feeding which should take place in the evening. Finally mouse guards should be fitted and hives generally secured against damage by wind.

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The National Honey Show presents annually a three day show of the best of the products of the honeybee, with additional classes for kindred interests and skills, including school bee-keeping, a lecture programme and a display of the latest and finest bee-keeping equipment on the market today.

It attracts entries and beekeepers from all over these Isles, and a number of leading organisations hold meetings during the Show.