SARE Project: A Comparison of Honey Bee Colony Strength and Survivability Between Nucleus and Package Started Colonies

SARE Project #FNE10-694

By MacGregor-Forbes, EAS Master Beekeeper
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The SARE project hives, like the rest of our bees here in Maine, are in their winter cluster working their way through their stores, hopefully to emerge in spring healthy and strong.

My last inspection of the Westbrook colonies was a simple check from the outside, no knocking on the hives or listening to the hum inside, I simply went out on a sunny day when there was fresh snow on the ground and temperatures in the 30s. Every single colony in the Westbrook yard had dead bees in the fresh snow outside the hive, indicating that the bees inside were alive and well.

Beekeepers are often anxious to check their hives in winter. I myself have definitely succumbed to these urges many times over the years, pressing my ear up against the hive and listening for the sound of the bees, perhaps knocking gently on the side of the hive to increase the bee's noise and see if I could hear them better. I also have used the bottom board inserts as a tool for checking bees—you can pull the insert out and clean it and then the next time you check the hive several days later, if you find debris on the bottom board, you know your bees are alive. Or at least were for some time since the last time you checked. On this most recent visit to the bee yard, I did none of that - I simply looked at the colonies, took a few pictures and left them alone.

For the most part, the Westbrook colonies went into winter with lots of honey. Five of the colonies are wintering in my preferred configuration, two deeps and a medium, ensuring that they have plenty of food to last until spring. The colonies that did not produce the extra medium of honey for winter are in the standard configuration of two deeps but went into winter

heavy, which is good. I am not worried about starvation yet but will check the colonies for stores closer to the end of the month.

Each colony in this yard has several upper entrances so there is no need to clear snow from the lower entrances. There is an open auger hole in each hive body and an additional escape route through the hole in the inner cover, lined up with grooved homasote insulation board for moisture wicking. It is through these upper entrances that the bees have been clearing out the dead and making their way out of the hive to defecate.

The deep accumulated snow is acting as good insulation on the tops of the colonies and is also helping to keep prying beekeepers from pestering the bees now when it is so important for the bees to be quiet and focused.

So as of this last recording, all fourteen of the Westbrook SARE colonies are alive and well, and my work on the project has been focused on compiling data and writing the interim and final reports. We are looking forward to spring, doing our first real inspections in a few months, and to a new year of beekeeping in Maine. The SARE project will end with our first full inspections in late April and we hope to have some good information from this colony comparison project. Our final results will be available on the Northeast SARE website when the reports are done.