

A Beekeeper's Calendar: Maine

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Below is a general guide for beekeeping in Maine. The timing of the activities may need to be adjusted based on the type of bees you have, your style of beekeeping, your local microclimate, and most importantly weather. Weather is the ultimate driver in beekeeping. Reach out to your local experienced beekeepers and beekeeping organizations who can answer questions and provide guidance and beekeeping advice. Have a great beekeeping year and remember that you will have more success adapting to the bee's schedule, than they will to yours.

January: The bees will spend most of the month in tight cluster. When the weather is above 40F the bees will move to new areas of the hive and take cleansing flights. Gauge food levels in wintering colonies by lifting one corner of the hive and feeling the "honey weight". If it is warm (above 40F without wind) you can quickly peek through the hole in the inner cover to see where the bees are in the hive and assess their food reserves. After every snow storm, clear entrances to allow for proper ventilation. Spend some time during this quiet part of the beekeeping year purchasing, assembling and/or repairing beekeeping equipment. Catch up on the stack of beekeeping texts and periodicals you set aside during the busier times of year. If you are a new beekeeper, sign up for a beekeeping course offered by Extension, Adult Education or local beekeeping association. Order packages or nucs for late April-June arrival.

February: This is a slow month for the bees. Late in the month, some queens may start to lay eggs. As a result, the hive will consume food faster than in Jan. Check wintering colonies for honey reserves by hefting the hive or peeking in on a warm day with no wind. Feed reserved honey frames (warm to room temperature before adding), sugar candy, or dry sugar if needed. Continue checking entrances for blockages of bees and/or snow.

March: Most queens will be laying eggs by the end of March. There will be very little natural forage available so monitoring food reserves is critical. It is not uncommon for a hive to make it through the hardest part of winter only to starve in March. If honey reserves are low, feed candy or dry sugar.

Colonies that consume feed should be monitored carefully and fed as needed. Feed pollen substitute to strong hives with plenty of honey stores in mid-March. Set up equipment for new packages/nucs. Install bear fences if your apiaries are in areas with high bear activity.

April: Brood production is ramping up this month. A few good pollen and nectar sources will start blooming, but poor weather may hinder the ability of foragers to access it. Continue monitoring food reserves and feed light syrup (1:1) inside the hive if necessary. Scrape bottom boards and quickly check the brood pattern on a mild day (calm and above 50F). If weather permits, sample wintered colonies for varroa mites using sugar or alcohol roll and if Varroa are detected above threshold apply mite treatments. Install new bees and feed light syrup. Continue feeding nucs and package bees until they have drawn out the comb in their brood chambers.

May: Brood rearing is in full force and populations inside the hive will build up quickly. Most of your time this month will be spent managing for population buildup and swarm prevention. Reverse brood chambers if necessary and inspect the brood pattern. Check the queen's performance and for symptoms of brood disease. Re-queen any hives with failing or poor performing queens. Divide colonies at fruit tree bloom to recoup winter loss, increase apiary size, and for swarm control. If you did not get to it in April, sample colonies for Varroa mites using sugar or alcohol roll and if Varroa are detected above threshold, apply mite treatments. Inspect new package bee colonies for health and queen condition. Manipulate frames if necessary to aid in comb construction and continue feeding nucs and package bees until they have drawn out the comb in their brood chambers. Manage new hives for population buildup and swarm prevention.

June: It's time to register your apiaries! Maine's first honey flows start at the very end of May/early June so add honey supers to hives as needed. Manage for swarm prevention by equalizing hives and making splits/ nucs.

July: Honey bee colonies hit their peak during this month. Add empty honey supers as needed. You can harvest honey when the honey flow slows (usually the end of July) or hold filled supers in a cool, protected location until the fall to evaluate whether the honey is needed for overwintering. Monitor Varroa populations. A mite treatment may be necessary prior to supering for the fall honey flow.

August: The colony is now just past its peak population and starting to raise larva that are destined to become winter bees. As the population of bees decreases in preparation for winter, it is important to keep an eye on mite levels which will continue increasing. Sample colonies for varroa mites using sugar or alcohol roll and if Varroa are detected above threshold, apply mite treatments. Make sure you follow the label instructions if you have honey supers on the hive. The last honey flow (goldenrod) usually starts in August so super hives as needed. Unite weak hives and position brood and honey stores in anticipation of winter. Check the status of your queens, there is still time to re-queen if there is a problem. Keep an eye on smaller hives for signs of robbing.

September: The year is starting to wind down. The queen has drastically reduced her egg laying and the hive is making its last foraging push before winter. If weather permits sample colonies for varroa mites one final time mid-September. It is not unusual to have a spike in varroa mite populations during this month as surrounding hives collapse from varroa infestations and mites migrate into your hives (called the “mite bomb” effect). Make sure you follow the label instructions if you have honey supers on the hive. Harvest any extra honey produced during the fall honey flow and remove empty/partially filled supers mid-September. Extract only ripe (capped) honey. Partially filled supers should be fed back to the bees above the inner cover. Reduce entrances and feed heavy (2:1) syrup or frames of honey to hives low on honey stores. Take measures to prevent robbing. Make plans for attending the MSBA Annual Meeting in October.

October: Finish feeding syrup by mid-October. Attend the MSBA Annual Meeting.

November: Provide upper ventilation. Remove mite treatments prior to wintering or wrapping the colony. Wrap colonies with tar paper or commercial wrap and provide with an insulating board or moisture absorbing material by Thanksgiving.

December: Sit back, enjoy a big mug of tea with honey, and start reading your favorite bee periodicals.