



WHAT'S UP WITH OUR HONEY BEES?

Continuing puzzle why bees die during the winter

Last winter's weather was a mixed blessing for honey bees. Unlike humans, they like cold and dry winters when they stay 'clustered' tightly in their hives, saving energy for exploratory spring foraging when mild spring days raise the temperature above 12 degrees.

And over the six month period from October 2010 to March 2011, during which the Met Office reports that November was coldest for nearly 20 years, December the coldest in 100 years and February the mildest and March the driest recently – the BBKA's 4th annual survey* of its members winter colony survival shows that continued regional** differences of dead hives can't just be explained by fluctuating weather. The overall national loss rate was 13.6%.***

- Highest losses 17.1% North of England
- Lowest losses 9.9% Heart of England
- Largest loss increase 16.8% South west England

This is the fourth consecutive year when BBKA members have reported unacceptably high colony losses which is especially puzzling when the weather should have been in the bees favour, but it does show how fragile the health of honey bees is.

Periods of poor nutrition within the active season from February to October remain a likely cause of weakness in adult bees that could cause them to succumb to diseases they would otherwise shrug off.

Martin Smith, BBKA President, said: "It is critical that we don't allow our honey bees to go hungry. Everyone who gardens, however small their plot, can provide the food desperately needed to feed bees.





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“It is really important that there are flowering nectar- rich plants around in August, September and October to provide the nutrition that’s needed so the bees can top up their stores of honey in the hive to see them through winter.

“Snowdrops and crocus provide the ‘starter’ meal for the year and summer flowering trees , plants and veg the ‘main course’. Ivy is a good source of autumn nectar – but there’s still time to get a packet of flower seeds and sow a ‘floral winter pud’ for a pollinator. The RHS Perfect for Pollinators Plant list has plenty of suggestions.

The BBKA is urging the Government not to forget that investment is still vitally needed for applied research addressing the everyday problems beekeepers face such as the lack of no effective bee medicine currently available to cure the problem of endemic diseases such as those associated with the varroa mite.

Mr. Smith continued: “This year’s losses may show an encouraging downward trend though still above the acceptable rate of 7-10 %, but if they were measured against similar losses in livestock and other areas of farming they would be seen as disastrous and there would be great concern on the knock-on impact on food prices

Ends

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Notes to editors

***The figures have been gathered from the first 982 responses to a random survey of 2,500 BBKA members on how many of their colonies of honey bees survived over the period 1 October 2010- 30 March 2011**

****Regions correspond with NBU regional breakdowns.**

***** The data will be contributed to the work of COLOSS - a European study into the Prevention of Colony Losses.www.coloss.org**





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RHS Plants for Pollinators:

<http://www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening?Sustainable-gardening/Plants-for-Pollinators>

Annual Statistics

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-2011
Loss Rate	30.1%	19.2%	17.7%	13.6%
Hives per Beekeeper	3.7	3.9	4.7	3.5
BBKA Members	12,500	14,000	17,500	20,000

2010-11 Regional Losses

Region	Loss Rate	Region	Loss Rate
Northern	16.6%	Eastern	14.1%
North Eastern	17.1%	South Eastern	14.0%
Western	9.9%	Southern	15.3%
South Western	16.8%	National (England)	13.6%

