

A Lot About Queens

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BEEKeeping

Your First Three Years



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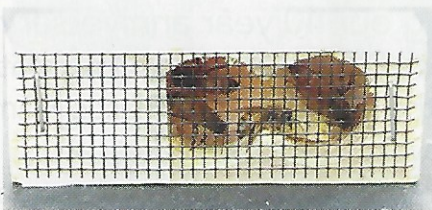
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Be Prepared Before You Ask for Help

Frank Mortimer

Beekeeping is a hobby that requires the beekeeper to have a certain amount of knowledge and also possess the tenacity to do what is necessary to make sure he has a firm understanding of what's happening in his hives. Success in beekeeping requires full and active participation; it's not something that can be done from the sidelines, or with just a vague basic belief of what might be happening.

It is every beekeeper's responsibility to have a thorough understanding of what is happening in each of his or her hives. Saying that, I can't help but remember an experience that taught me the value of being a prepared beekeeper.

Years ago, I bought an old house that was a real fixer-upper. I didn't have any experience or knowledge about the work that was needed, but I was determined to do most of the work myself. One of the first things I did was to replace the upstairs' bathroom fixtures and vanity. I had purchased the vanity, faucet, and shower head before I even closed on the house, as I thought they were the perfect complement to my soon-to-be renovated bathroom. Once I started replacing the vanity, I realized I was missing a lot of stuff, namely the correct tools, and the right replacement pipes to get the job done.

Luckily, there was an excellent local hardware store a mile down the road, so one Saturday morning I drove down to get what I needed. Over in the plumbing section, there was a gentleman helping another customer with his plumbing issue. I didn't quite know what they were talking about; other than I knew it was about plumbing, and what

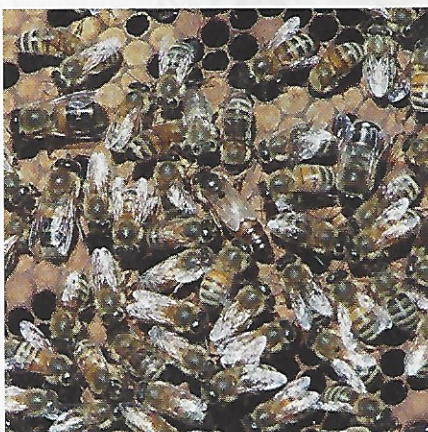
was the best way to get the job done. (Apparently there was more than one way to approach the job, and they were discussing the varying approaches.) Based on the conversation I was listening to, I knew this guy knew plumbing and that he could help me.

I introduced myself to the plumbing expert and preceded to explain my situation, using my hands to show the shapes of pipes I needed. After about two minutes of me trying to explain what I needed, the expert finally stopped me and said, "I have no idea

what you're talking about." I was shocked! I just heard him offer expert advice to someone else and now he was telling me that he didn't even understand what I was saying. He then said, "What are your measurements?" and, "What size fittings do you need for this job?" I told him that I didn't know, and that I hadn't measured anything. This was my first lesson in how to speak with an expert: use details that are commonly used by experts,



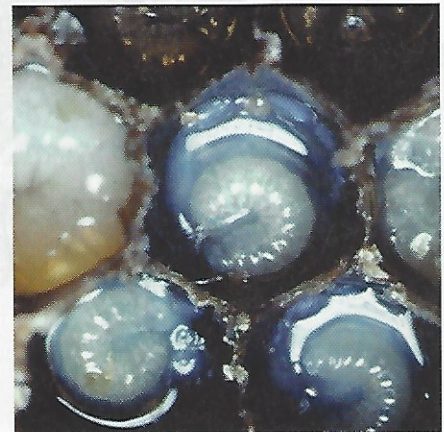
Lots of brood, no bees.



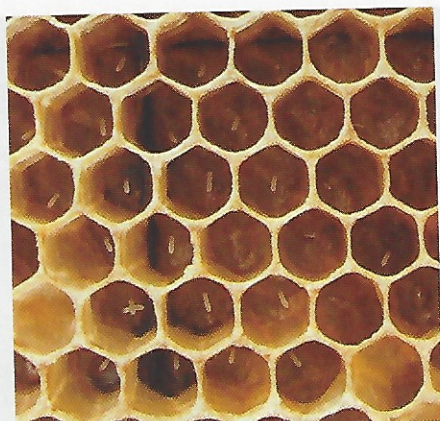
Do you see the queen?



Capped brood.



Larvae.



Did you see eggs?



Nectar and honey.

such as precise measurements and the names of actual plumbing parts.

I was determined to show him that I was not going to quit until I got the job done, and at one point, I even brought my faucet and pipes in a box to the hardware store so that the expert could show me how to sort them out.

That day it took me four trips to the hardware store and a lot of tenacity, but I finally learned how to communicate with the plumbing expert and earn some respect. I shook his hand, said thank you for the plumbing lesson and headed home with everything I needed to get the job done. Since I had all the information and supplies I needed, when I got home that last time, I was able to install my new bathroom faucet in "This Old House" record time.

The plumbing expert taught me, a first-time homeowner, how to approach a job and what I needed to know so I could get it done right. That daylong lesson taught me the importance of providing an expert with information he or she needs to be able to help.

So, what does my plumbing story have to do with beekeeping?

Everything . . .

Experienced beekeepers, mentors, and club officers are always available to help, but any real help first requires that the beekeeper also does his or her part. Specifically, a beekeeper should answer these questions every time he or she goes into his or her hives:



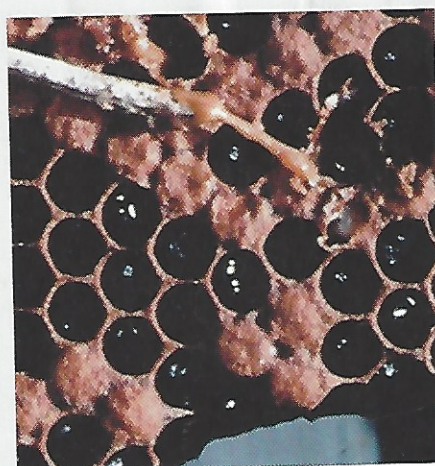
Brood and honey.

- 1) Did I see the queen?
- 2) Did I see signs of the queen, specifically:
Capped Brood?
Larvae?
Eggs?
- 3) How many frames of brood did I see?
- 4) How much honey/nectar do the bees have?
- 5) Did I see anything weird?
Swarm cells or supersedure?
Pests, foulbrood, DWV?
Lack of bees, chalkbrood, SHB, *Varroa*?

If you can answer these five questions, then you have done your part. You might still have a lot of questions,



Swarm cells or supersedure cells?



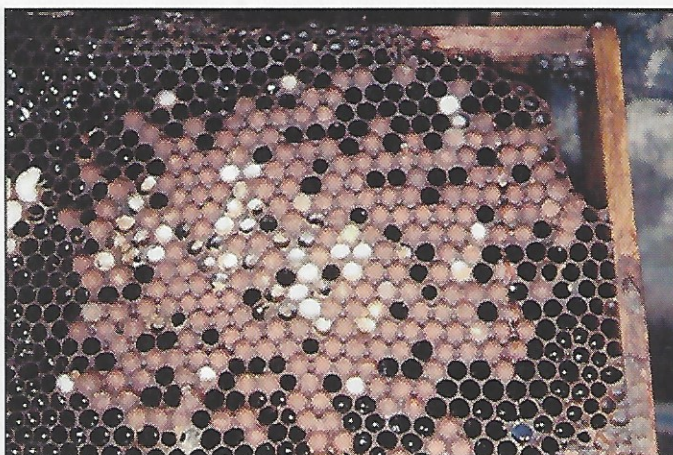
Could this be foulbrood?



Deformed Wing Virus.



Varroa.



Could this be chalkbrood?



Small Hive Beetle.

and you might not know what to do next, but if you can answer these five questions, then based on the details about your hive, another beekeeper can offer you advice on what to do.

If you're not sure how to tell the difference between capped brood and honey, then pick-up a book on beekeeping so you know what to look for. There are dozens of excellent books on beekeeping, many aimed specifically at when you are just starting out. There are also many great resources you can rely on, like the magazine you are currently reading, locally prepared manuals, or even your bee club's newsletters. Online, there are lots of photos, illustrations, and videos that you can view to gain a better of understanding of what's happening inside your hive. (However, like everything else online, make sure your information is from a reputable source or trusted beekeeper so you know that the information you are relying on is accurate and based on facts.)

Additionally, that's why it's so important for you to do a thorough inspection of your hives *before* asking for help. Being a beekeeper means going into your hives, pulling out at a minimum four to six frames per box so that you can answer those five questions. Also, you have to look at the frames, not at the bees, which means if "there are

too many bees in the way," then you have to move them out of the way to see what's in the cells on that frame.

Beekeeping is a real passion for most people who have been keeping bees for a while. There is a meme going around that says, "I don't always talk about bees, sometimes I'm asleep" and I do think that sums up how I feel and the passion one gets for beekeeping. Every time you open a hive and see your bees doing what you want them to be doing, and your hive growing as it should be growing, it only adds more fire to that passion. For most of us, it is a passion for beekeeping – successfully – and the desire to see bees flourish, that drives beekeepers to want to help new beekeepers. The more experienced beekeepers you meet, the more you'll hear a common theme to their advice: You can only learn by going into your hives, looking for signs that the colony is in good shape, and knowing when something doesn't look right.

You'll also notice that most beekeepers are quick to want to help. I think it's the nurturing nature of a beekeeper that's at the root of wanting to help others. But always keep in mind that an expert's help is only as good as the details he has to work with, and without details, an expert doesn't have what he needs to help. The thing to remember is that help comes in many different lessons and takes on a lot of different forms. It takes experience and a good teacher to know the best way to teach someone who is still learning the basics. A good teacher will let the student be the one who goes into the hive, because the student will learn more by doing it himself than by passively watching someone else do the work for him. The teacher is available to answer questions, and help the student when he gets stuck or doesn't know what to do next, but the student must always do his part first, gather information from the hive, then ask questions based on the details of what he has seen firsthand. That's the lesson I learned from my fixer-upper house with plumbing problems. Sometimes the best way to truly help someone is to teach him that it's his responsibility to first be prepared with all the necessary details before approaching someone else for advice or guidance. 🐝