

January is a slow month for beekeeping. There aren't many demands from the hive this time of year. Mostly we just want to ensure that our little darlings still have plenty of stored honey to get them through until the main nectar flow starts in April. I don't do full-out inspections this time of year, even when the weather permits. If I find a problem such as no queen, few bees or a very high varroa count, what can I do about it? January isn't the time to re-queen, combine hives or treat with miticides. So pulling frames and disrupting the colony would serve no purpose. Low honey stores are definitely something to fix, but I don't have to open up the hive to know about that. Lifting the hive from the back and judging its weight is something I can do rain or shine, when it's hot or cold, without putting the colony at risk. And if a quick knock on the side of the hive is answered by a loud "buzz!" then I know the colony is still alive.



But just because the bees won't benefit from being messed with in January doesn't mean that there isn't a lot of bee stuff that can be done now.

First and foremost, if you are planning to purchase bees this spring; get your order in now. Package and Nuc suppliers work on a first-come, first-served basis. Even though you will not receive your bees until April or May, suppliers' order-books fill up fast. Here in central North Carolina, the secret to getting a new colony successfully started is simple: you must install your bees early enough for them to draw out twenty deep frames of comb (or equivalent) and fill them with brood and honey

before the main honey flow stops in June. In a normal year, if your bees arrive in April you should be in great shape. If you don't get them until late May or June, you face a real challenge. The reason for this is that most bees are very reluctant to draw comb unless there is a natural honey flow in progress. You'll have to feed sugar syrup all through the summer to try to coax them to build comb. That doesn't mean your bees are doomed, just that you have a lot of work to do. If the colony goes into fall without sufficient contiguous drawn comb to store honey and raise brood, their chance of survival is low. Note that getting an early planned delivery date from your supplier is important but the weather can push the actual delivery later than scheduled. In recent years, package suppliers have sometimes had to delay shipments by up to a month because of a cold, wet spring. This makes getting a spot on the top of the delivery list even more important. Suppliers have also been known to sell out due to high demand, another reason to order early.

A word of warning when purchasing queens and packages: do not buy them from areas of the US where Africanized Honey Bees (so-called "killer bees") are embedded. These include Texas, southern California and Florida, regions that are home to a few major bee suppliers. When Africanized bees invaded their production areas, these large companies were faced with a tough choice: they could relocate, go out of business or convince people that bees from Hell aren't really all that bad. There are prominent companies that have chosen the third option. Don't be conned by sales rhetoric about the disease resistance and varroa tolerance of Africanized bees. You can get even better representations of these characteristics from well-mannered European bee strains such as Minnesota Hygienic and others selected for

Varroa Sensitive Hygiene, and these won't kill your pets and cause your local government to ban beekeeping.

It is against state law to sell Africanized Honey Bees in North Carolina, but the US Postal Service doesn't enforce NC restrictions. So it is up to your own good sense to keep these bees out. Most packages come to North Carolina from Georgia, which is still free of Africanized bees, so these bees are "safe". Refer to the NC Department of Agriculture's list of [vendors with a permit to sell bees](#) in our state as the first step to knowing what you are buying!

Once you've ordered your bees, take a class. Many local beekeeping associations offer beginning beekeeping courses that start in January. Alamance, Caswell, Chatham, Orange, Person and Wake County associations all put on well-respected bee schools, some every year and others every other year. Find contact information at [www.ncbeekeepers.com](http://www.ncbeekeepers.com) and sign up ASAP.

Even if you don't take a class, January is a great time to join a beekeeping association. Every county in the Triangle has its own, but they deliberately stagger their meeting nights so that you can attend more than one. There will be lots of new, want-to-be and just-thinking-about beekeepers at the meetings this time of year, so you'll fit right in.

Cold and rainy (or snowy) days are great for catching up on your reading. Skip the internet blogs posted by self-declared experts and go for the real deal. New beekeepers should read [The Beekeeper's Handbook](#) by Diana Sammataro and Alfonse Avitabile. [Honeybee Democracy](#) by Tom Seeley is a fascinating discussion of honey bee behavior and decision-making. A great book about Man's fascination with honey bees is

Hilda Ransome's [The Sacred Bee](#). If you can't tear yourself away from the internet, take a look at the beekeeping newsletters and webinars put out by the genuine experts at the [University of Georgia](#), [University of California at Davis](#), [Ohio State](#) and [NC State](#).

Winter is also the perfect time to get your beekeeping equipment in shape. I just finished making open-air racks to hang my honey super frames, a great idea I took from Todd Walker in Person County. The racks provide sunlight and air to the combs, deterring wax moths. I bought a box full of new foundation I need to put in frames. I need to check my boxes to see which ones need repair and paint. The time to do all this is now, not later when I'm in a rush to put supers on hives, make splits and do all the other duties of spring.

The calendar promises us that the cold and dreary days won't last forever. Spring will come again just like it did last year. I encourage you to make the best use of your down-time in the apiary by taking care of indoor beekeeping tasks. They'll make your spring even more rewarding when it finally arrives.

Photo: The author does the "lift test" to estimate the amount of stored honey that remains. A light hive in January must be fed to ensure its survival.

*Randall Austin is a NC Master Beekeeper who keeps a few honey bee hives in northern Orange County. He can be reached at [s.randall.austin@gmail.com](mailto:s.randall.austin@gmail.com).*

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