



## Southampton & District Beekeepers Association

[www.southamptonbeekeepers.co.uk](http://www.southamptonbeekeepers.co.uk)

### How Do I? Information Sheet #2

#### Getting The Most From Your Bees On The Heather

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1. I arrange my hives in pairs on the heather & as the honey flow starts amalgamate the pairs, selecting the best queens & culling the worst. If I'm not amalgamating I have to "plump" a colony up to make it extra strong to get the most honey crop.
2. Having found the queen to be killed, she is dispatched as humanely/quickly as I can, which is not an easy thing to do but necessary. The hive boxes are then placed on top of the remaining queen right colony with a sheet of newspaper in-between. After a day or so the bees chew through the paper & are accepted by the colony below & don't fight. (A young vigorous queen is essential to keep the brood box as full of brood as possible). Bear this in mind when making your selection.
3. Once amalgamated, arrange all the frames with brood into one box & try to get frames with eggs on the outside edges & frames with sealed or hatching brood in the middle. All spare frames are then shaken free of bees & returned to a stay at home hive for any remaining brood to hatch & then the honey extracted & comb melted down. This is important as if left on the colony in the forest the bees will fill it with heather honey, which is then very difficult to extract. Having arranged the frames as described the brood nest area is kept large for as long as possible, ensuring most of the heather honey goes into the supers.
4. If the weather is hot, still & the nectar flow is on I have had a strong colony fill two supers in a week! But most years expect to get in total 1 to 2 supers per hive, however in a really good year 4 supers have been recorded. The bees get tired very quickly on the heather & the population in most colonies is reducing at that time of year, so as soon as the honey is capped off remove & extract/press/cut out, as increasing air humidity in the autumn & decreasing numbers of bees make keeping the honey in good condition within the hive supers, difficult. Heather honey does naturally have a higher water content than most honeys & can be prone to ferment, so good hygiene when extracting is even more important than usual.
5. Processing Heather honey, (Ling heather). As heather honey is thixotropic, (jelly like, but liquefying on agitation/stirring), it is difficult to spin out in the normal way. The comb can be spun but after uncapping it needs to be needled with a perforextractor, (this punctures the midrib/foundation in the comb & in the process agitates the honey so liquefying it temporarily). The comb is then spun in a tangentially arranged spinner, (a radial spinner doesn't quite do the job as the honey is still so thick).

An alternative way to extract the honey from the comb is to press the honey out using a heather press. I used a vigo fruit press, (these can be hired from a good homebrew shop), last year with the addition of a packing block in the barrel part of the press, which worked to great effect. The barrel is lined with straining cloth, (I use butter muslin), & then loaded with mashed up comb.

6. It is then pressed in a slow but steady manner. This processing has the benefit of straining the honey at the same time so removing pieces of wax & bits of pollen. The resulting honey has lots of air bubbles trapped in it, which is a recognised sign of quality, so the jars need to be filled almost to the top to reach the right weight. The easiest way is to of course to leave it in the comb & cut it out as comb honey, but you need to ensure unwired foundation is used at the start, or just use starter strips.
7. The return journey is usually easier as the days are shorter & the bees are tucked up for the night by about 18.00hrs, any varroa treatments are best done on the heather, but as soon as the crop is taken off in September any delay in putting in the strips then makes it difficult to remove them in late October, early November. On one occasion we had a really wet September & the track was flooded to a depth of four inches, making driving out difficult, but the bees were fine. Hives are required to be off the sites no later than 31 October & the key returned. The bees are then put back onto hive stands in their winter quarters or new location, such as apiary site or garden, going on to work the ivy if the weather is agreeable. I have also noticed a number of queens are superseded while on the heather, this needs to be monitored carefully the next year, as the numbers of drones & their quality are both low at that time of year resulting in poor mating. It is better to have culled the old queens & only have the young vigorous queens on the heather to ensure that it does not result in poor mating.
8. However you decide to harvest your crop, if you use drawn comb to start with higher yields will result. Ensure that you choose combs that have not got cells full of pollen, as this gets in the way when using the perforextractor or needling device.
9. As a postscript note of interest the cappings of heather honey I have found to produce the best quality wax for showing & candle making. It is highly scented & a beautiful pale gold in colour. The crushed wax comb left in the cloth after pressing is then melted down & purified & exchanged for new foundation. The frames are also steam cleaned & refitted with new foundation the following season.