

WARRE HIVES - TO WARRE OR NOT TO WARRE ?

Many of us at the Teaching Apiary use National Hives or similar 'framed' hives. For a number of years though, interest in alternative approaches to beekeeping has been growing.

In this article we look at some of the reasons for this and provide links to further information about Warre and Top-Bar hives for those who would like to investigate this approach in more detail.

The Frame hive such as the National is the current standard (and used at the TA) style of hive. Each Brood and Super Box contains 10 to 12 frames, normally with a sheet of foundation wax. The bees build wax comb on this foundation. The frames are removable and can be taken out to remove honey and/or inspect the overall hive.

There are a number of advantages to this method. It encourages the bees to maximise honey production and the honey is easily extracted. It is easy to examine the Bees for disease, and to manipulate the Hives to the beekeepers advantage.

Some say though, that there are a number of disadvantages. While the framed hive requires opening up and inspecting the bees, this is not something that happens in nature. Every time we inspect the bees we are in danger of chilling them, causing them to spend energy to maintain the required temperature in the hive.

The Warre Hive consists of a number of boxes of the same size and a roof. The top box has a "quilt" to help insulate the hive— while above this is a box of wood shavings that help control humidity.

There are no frames - instead top bars are used with no foundation - the bees build the comb downwards from these top bars themselves.

Bees naturally build comb downwards and prefer to have their stores above their brood. In the Warre system, additional boxes are added at the *bottom* of the Hive (the whole hive is lifted without taking it apart to achieve this.) The Bees tend to move the brood downwards. In this way, any excess honey can be harvested from the top box. Warre boxes are smaller which, it is said, bees prefer and cause them less stress. The improved ventilation and insulation also leads to a healthier environment for the bees. As the Warre beekeeper is not managing the hive for maximum production, the hive is rarely opened and therefore is less disturbing to the bees. This reduction in stress is claimed to lead to healthier bees, and bees that are more resistant to diseases (which in turn reduces the need to inspect them.)

Warre hives are cheaper to buy and are also easy to make (link to a build plan is given below.)

Extracting the honey is not as efficient. There are few extractors available so the beekeeper has to either use heat or, after uncapping the comb, let the honey drain out. Yields are significantly lower.

There is an ever-increasing number of books and articles about Warre hives and below are some links to a few.

An article responding to doubt about the Warre approach:

http://www.dheaf.plus.com/warrebeekeeping/heaf_replies_to_davies.pdf

Plans for building a Warre Hive:

<http://www.warre.biobees.com/plans.htm>

Link to e-book written by Abbe Warre (the man himself):

http://www.users.callnetuk.com/~heaf/beekeeping_for_all.pdf