Year in the Apiary – Monthly & Seasonal Strategy (UK)

This document summarises a practical Year in the Apiary for UK beekeepers in a cool, temperate climate. It combines a month-by-month view of colony behaviour and beekeeper tasks with a seasonal strategy and a rule-of-thumb weather guide for inspections. Use it alongside local association notes, BeeBase guidance and what you see on the frames in front of you.

January

- Bees remain tightly clustered; brood is minimal in colder regions.
- Heft hives to assess stores; add fondant directly above the cluster if colonies feel light.
- Do not perform full inspections; limit yourself to entrance checks, straps, roofs and stands.
- Check entrances are clear of dead bees, ice or snow and that mouse guards are secure.
- Use this quiet time to repair equipment, clean tools and review last season's records.

February

- Brood rearing begins or accelerates; consumption of stores increases sharply.
- Heft hives more frequently (every 1–2 weeks) and be ready with fondant for borderline colonies.
- Watch for signs of dwindling colonies from outside (weak flight, few bees at the entrance on mild days).
- Avoid over-opening hives in cold spells; quick crownboard checks only when necessary.
- Finalise new equipment, frames and boxes so you are ready for spring expansion.

March

- Depending on weather, first full inspections may be possible on calm days above ~12–14°C.
- Confirm queen-right status, brood pattern, bee numbers and disease signs.
- Remove any remaining emergency fondant if nectar and pollen are coming in steadily.
- Begin gentle comb replacement (one or two frames at a time) in strong colonies.
- Assess strength differences between colonies and make notes for future equalisation.

April

- Brood area expands rapidly; colonies can outgrow the brood box if space is not managed.
- Add supers early for strong colonies when nectar flow is starting or imminent.
- Move to approximately 7-day inspection intervals where weather allows, looking for queen cells.
- Watch for chilled brood risk if you over-expand the brood nest in marginal weather.
- Evaluate early forage in your area (willow, dandelion, fruit blossom) and its effect on build-up.

May

- Main swarming season in much of the UK; inspections every 7 days are strongly recommended.
- Apply a clear swarm control strategy (artificial swarm, nucleus creation or other method).
- Add supers ahead of need so bees always have space for nectar and to reduce swarm pressure.
- Monitor temper and brood pattern; consider requeening poor-temper or failing queens when conditions allow.
- Use strong colonies to raise nucs if you have surplus bees and good forage.

June

- Often the main honey flow month; colonies are at or near peak population.
- Continue regular swarm checks, though pressure may ease later in the month depending on forage.
- Add supers promptly; aim to keep at least one partly empty super on strong colonies during a flow.
- Watch for signs of queen exhaustion or supersedure and record any queen cells you see.
- Check varroa levels (e.g. drop counts) to inform your late-summer treatment strategy.

July

- Honey flow may continue or begin to tail off; this depends heavily on region and forage.
- Manage hive ventilation and provide shade where possible in very hot weather.
- Watch for robbing behaviour, especially towards weaker colonies or open feed sources.
- Decide when to remove supers for extraction once they are mostly capped and moisture levels are suitable.
- Begin planning equipment and timing for late summer varroa treatments after honey removal.

August

- Many beekeepers remove the main honey crop this month and return wet supers for cleaning up.
- Once supers are off, begin primary varroa treatments in line with current UK guidance and product labels.
- Assess each colony's strength and temper; consider uniting very weak colonies rather than overwintering them.
- Start autumn feeding plan after treatments if stores are insufficient for winter.
- Protect stored frames and comb from wax moth and rodents.

September

- Autumn feeding is a priority; aim for appropriate winter stores (often quoted around 20–25 kg per hive, depending on hive type and region).

- Complete varroa treatment cycles and record mite drop results where possible.
- Reduce entrances to deter wasps and robbing, especially in wasp-prone areas.
- Check queen performance and brood pattern; late-season queen replacement may be more challenging.
- Ensure hives are weathertight and set up for wind and rain before the first storms arrive.

October

- Finish any remaining feeding before temperatures drop too low for bees to process syrup.
- Fit or check mouse guards and ensure entrances are the right size for the colony and local conditions.
- Review insulation above the brood nest and make sure roofs are sound and secure.
- Remove unused supers and consider freezing surplus comb to prevent wax moth.
- Carry out only minimal internal checks; focus on external security and weatherproofing.

November

- Bees form a tighter cluster; brood presence may shrink significantly or cease for a period.
- Heft hives occasionally to confirm that winter stores are still adequate.
- Avoid opening hives unless absolutely necessary; rely on external observations.
- Prepare for a mid-winter oxalic acid varroa treatment during a brood-light or broodless period if you plan to use one.
- Deep-clean unused equipment and store it in cool, dry, pest-free conditions.

December

- Deep winter; bees are usually in a tight cluster with limited or no brood in colder spells.
- If using oxalic acid, this is often the window for a single mid-winter treatment when colonies are brood-light (following current guidance).
- Limit disturbance to essential tasks only: checking straps, roofs, stands and entrances after bad weather.
- Heft hives occasionally; add fondant if a colony feels dangerously light, working quickly to avoid chilling.
- Review the entire season’s notes and plan changes to equipment, bee stocks and management for next year.

Seasonal Strategy – Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter

The same themes repeat each year: build-up, honey production, reduction and survival. This section groups the monthly work into four broad seasons and highlights the strategic focus in each.

Spring – Build-Up and Brood Expansion (roughly March–May)

- Objective: Build strong, healthy colonies with enough space and resources before the main nectar flow.
- Key tasks: first full inspections, confirming queen-right status, gentle comb replacement and early supering.
- Risks: chilled brood in marginal weather, missed queen cells during rapid expansion, underestimating food needs.
- Notes: Adjust timing for your region; exposed or upland sites may lag several weeks behind sheltered city gardens.

Summer – Nectar Flow, Honey Production and Swarm Management (roughly June–July)

- Objective: Maintain strong foraging colonies with enough space to gather nectar and store honey.
- Key tasks: ongoing swarm control, super management, ventilation and monitoring for queen issues.
- Risks: late swarms, overheating and robbing if entrances or supers are mismanaged.
- Notes: Some areas see major flows from lime, clover or bramble; others may be sparse, affecting yield and management.

Autumn – Feeding, Varroa Control and Winter Preparation (roughly August–October)

- Objective: Enter winter with healthy, well-fed colonies on sound comb, in weatherproof hives.
- Key tasks: honey removal, varroa treatments, uniting weak hives and building sufficient winter stores.
- Risks: starting treatments or feeding too late, leaving colonies weak or under-supplied as temperatures fall.
- Notes: Use mite drop counts and local guidance to refine the timing and choice of varroa treatments.

Winter – Survival, Monitoring and Planning (roughly November–February)

- Objective: Keep colonies alive, dry and well-fed with minimal disturbance.
- Key tasks: occasional hefting, emergency fondant if required, storm damage checks and planning for next season.

- Risks: starvation late in winter, unnoticed damage to roofs or stands, excessive disturbance out of curiosity.
- Notes: Winter is an ideal time for study, record review and refining your management plan for the coming year.

Rule-of-Thumb Weather Guide for Inspections (UK)

The figures below are approximate and assume light winds and dry conditions. Always prioritise local advice and your own judgement. If in doubt, postpone a full inspection.

Outside conditions	Typical bee behaviour	What the beekeeper might do
Below 8°C, wet or windy	Bees remain tightly clustered; very little flight.	Do not open hives. Check entrances, straps, roofs and stands only.
8–12°C, light breeze, dry	Short cleansing flights and limited foraging.	If necessary, perform very brief checks at the crownboard and emergency feeding.
12–15°C, dry and calm	Regular flights, increasing brood rearing.	Quick but reasonably complete inspections if required, especially in early spring.
15°C and above, settled weather	Strong foraging and rapid brood expansion.	Carry out full inspections, swarm control, supering and detailed hive management.

Remember that wind, humidity, time of day and forage availability also affect how bees behave during inspections. Use this guide as a starting point, not a strict rule.