

## Heather honey, beekeeping with altitude

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The mountains of north Wales are covered in heather, a valuable source of honey, but one that is barely exploited by beekeepers.

Honey from the ling heather *calluna vulgaris* has a very strong distinctive flavour, and is much sought after by customers.

Beekeepers selling heather honey or heather blend honey at the Conwy Honey Fair usually have the longest queues!

I hope that these notes, based on 30 years of moving bees to the heather, may encourage others to move their bees to the heather.

### *Why move bees to the heather?*

1. The heather is in flower on the mountains in August, when most of the valley flowers, except Himalayan balsam, have finished.
2. The heather gives you the chance of a valuable late season crop of honey.
3. It's great fun! The mid season work of swarm control, making nucs, and queen rearing is over, and moving to the heather is an enjoyable end to the honey season.
4. Beeswax from the heather has the finest aroma of any wax.
5. Bees taken to the heather usually winter well.

### *What is the potential honey crop?*

A strong hive can produce two full supers of heather honey plus its winter feed, if we have some wet weather in May and June to get the heather growing, and fine weather in August. No other flower, except possibly oil seed rape or borage, can produce a crop of honey so quickly.

Some years you won't get a sniff of honey, but most years it's worth the effort of moving the hives.

### *How far will bees fly to the heather?*

My bees will fly two miles from my home apiary in the Conwy Valley to the heather on Tal y Fan Mountain in a good summer. You can smell the heather honey in the hive. Sometimes they will fill a super with heather honey without being moved from home. However, they will always do much better if they are moved right into the heather.

### *How do you find a hive site on the heather?*

There is no substitute for a strong pair of boots and a good map, and some serious legwork. We do not recommend communal heather hive sites, because of the possibility of spreading bee diseases.

### *Can I place hives on the Forestry Commission land?*

Yes. The FC roads give access to some interesting and remote sites, with a wide variety of bee flora. The FC requires a risk assessment, a method statement, and public liability insurance for £5 million (which is included in your WBKA membership) and a map showing hive location. The annual charge is £50 per person for a hobby beekeeper, and is negotiable for commercial beekeepers.

Contact your local FC office. See [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk)

### *What makes a good heather hive site?*

1. A sheltered but sunny site, perhaps behind a stone wall.
2. Plenty of young heather all around.
3. Good access by vehicle right up to the hives.
4. Avoid a site that will be muddy when you come to move the hives home.
5. Site your hives well away from public footpaths.
6. Maximum altitude 800ft. Let the bees fly uphill empty to the heather, and fly back downhill to the hive with a full load of nectar.

### *Do you need permission?*

Yes, you do. Find out who farms/owns the land and ask for their permission before moving hives. Agree a rent in advance; say one jar of honey per hive per year.

### *How do you prepare the site?*

Clear any bracken and tripping stones. Use old car tyres as hive stands.

*How do you prepare colonies for the heather?*

1. Choose strong colonies with a new queen and plenty of young brood.
2. Remove any summer honey supers and the queen excluder.
3. Check that the bees are healthy.
4. The hive woodwork must be in good condition. The bees will soon find any gaps when you are moving them.
5. Set the hive up with a mesh floor, brood box and a half, crown board and roof.
6. No need for a travelling screen if you use a mesh floor.
7. Close the hive with a foam entrance block and fit two hive straps.

*When do you move the bees to the heather?*

End of July / early August.

*What time of day?*

The bees are usually dormant in the early morning and you will not be fighting the daylight. Evening moves have to wait until the bees have settled down for the night, before closing the hive, but can be followed by a visit to the local pub.

*How many people to move hives?*

1. Moving hives on your own is a dreary business.
2. Working with another beekeeper is usually good fun. One can fit the foam entrance blocks, while the other fits the straps and collects the hive roofs.
3. A two-person hive lifter makes the move very easy. Conwy BKA offers locally-made hive lifters for sale.
4. Loading and unloading a vehicle is easy with two people, but backbreaking on your own.

*What can go wrong when moving bees?*

Plenty of things!

1. Car gets stuck on wet ground.
2. Bees escape from a leaky hive.
3. Car breaks down, as mine did while taking hives to the heather in 2009. I had to be towed 10 miles home.
4. 4WD pickup is the best means of transport.

*When does the ling heather produce honey?*

From early August to end of August. The bees may also benefit from Erica heath, rosebay willow herb, and blackberry, which flower until early August. September nights at altitude are usually too cool to allow honey production.

*Setting up the hive*

Place the hive facing south on a car tyre, with a heavy rock on the roof. No need for fencing. Remove the straps and make sure you remove all the foam entrance blocks.

*When do you fit supers?*

A few days after the hives have been moved, I fit two supers to each hive, with a mixture of thin unwired foundation and drawn comb. No need for a queen excluder at the heather. I only ever use thin unwired foundation in the supers.

*Why unwired foundation?*

The comb will be cut out of the frame for pressing, and I want to avoid any chance of pieces of wire finding their way into the honey buckets.

*I've heard that the bees can be bad-tempered on the heather?*

Yes, it's true, and it may be because the rapid flow of nectar can easily switch off if the weather changes. Keep your manipulations at the heather to a minimum, and only work the bees when the weather is fine.

*When do you remove the honey supers?*

Early September, in time for the Conwy Honey Fair on 13<sup>th</sup> September.

*Is it feasible to leave the hives at the heather site all the year round?*

I once tried this, but they struggled through the winter, and there was very little spring pollen nearby.

Much better to bring them back down.

*When do you move the bees home?*

Mid September.

*How do you remove the honey from the combs?*

1. Heather honey is thixotropic and cannot be spun out from the combs in an extractor. The most successful way is by pressing out the honey.
2. The best heather press was made by Mountain Grey. MG honey presses occasionally come up for sale on eBay, and are worth seeking out. I bought one by putting a Wanted ad in BeeCraft. Still worth a try.
3. Cut out the full combs. Place in a hessian straining bag, crunch up the combs and press the honey out.
4. Thorne's sell an economy heather press.
5. Another option is the Perforextractor, The honey in the comb is agitated and loosened with a bed of sharp needles fitted to a handle, and the comb can then be spun in a tangential extractor. The percentage of honey removed is quite low.
6. Heather honey can be cut into blocks and sold as cut comb in plastic boxes holding about 200g of honey. Very popular at the Conwy Honey Fair.

*Preparing heather honey for sale*

My best-selling honey is made from a blend of oil seed rape honey and ling heather honey. Visitors to Conwy Honey Fair just love this honey, and it sells out very quickly.

I store the rape honey in 30lb buckets in a dark, cool barn from June until the heather honey is ready in early September.

I never bottle pure heather honey. The flavour is too strong for most customers, and there is a tendency for the honey to ferment in storage. Heather blend honey should keep for nine months without fermenting.

You will need:

A warming box, with two light bulbs to soften the rape honey.

A 100lb settling / bottling tank.

Two Thorne's pouring aids.

One Thorne's honey creamer.

Warm up two buckets of rape honey in the warming box, until it has the viscosity of porage. If you don't have any rape honey, any buckets of granulated honey can be used.

*Early morning.....*

Check that the settling tank tap is fully closed.

Empty the two buckets of rape honey into the settling tank.

Empty one 30lb bucket of freshly pressed heather honey into the settling tank.

Mix very thoroughly for a few minutes with a honey creamer

Cover the tank and leave until evening.

*Same day, early evening*

Bottle all the honey.

If you leave the bottling overnight, the mixture will start to set. It will certainly be slower to bottle.

The honey should be stored in a cool, dark room or barn. I use blue mushroom boxes, which hold 15 x 1lb jars. I label the jars as I sell them. Sometimes the honey frosts in storage. You can hide the frosting under the label!

*Advantages of blending heather honey.*

1. Good heather flavour.
2. Adds value to oil seed rape honey.
3. Keeps well without fermenting.
4. Sells very easily.

*How do you label your heather blend honey?*

Either as Heather Blend Honey or just as Conwy Honey.

*Preparing heather colonies for winter*

1. I check for a laying queen and brood before bringing the hives home.
2. I fit an eke and the first Apiguard tray at the heather. Make sure the mite catch tray is in place.
3. After two weeks, with the heather hives now at home, I check the weight and if necessary feed using a rapid tray feeder.
4. I then fit the second Apiguard tray.
5. In late September when the treatment is finished, I remove the eke, and fit a part-filled super, to store any ivy honey or late Himalayan balsam honey.
6. Sometimes the bees will fill the eke with late brood and wild comb. I usually leave that in place until the spring.

*Thanks for the information. Yes, I'll be moving my bees to the heather this year.*

*Further reading:*

Bees to the heather, Stanley Whitehead.

Art of Beekeeping, William Hamilton.

Sixty years with bees, Donald Sims.

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and Llyn Craftnant