Swarm Management for Beekeepers

Why do beekeepers want to prevent swarms?

- Swarms can be a public nuisance. Beekeepers must consider swarm management critical to keeping the hobby legal – remember your hive management can impact all beekeepers!
- To avoid loss of honey production
- Late season swarms can jeopardize parent-colony survival

Hive conditions that trigger swarming behavior:

1. Crowded broodnest
2. Lack of storage space for honey
3. Old or Poor quality queen

Inspect and manage signs of swarming:

During swarm season (typically mid-April – July in Western Washington) Inspect hives every 7-10 days and do the following:

Look for swarm cells: these can be found on the edges of the comb or usually on the bottom bar. Swarm cells are similar in size and shape to a peanut shell. In a two-story colony swarm cells are usually found between the two stories. Do not confuse swarm cells with supercedure cells (typically found on the upper 1/3rd of a frame).

Continually manage space in the hive: Provide room for broodnest growth and honey storage. Signs of crowding include: bees "boiling over" when the broodnest is opened or bees "bearding" on the outside of the hive. Nectar storage where the queen normally lays eggs can signal crowding and that swarming preparations are underway. To remedy:

- Move frames of honey and maybe capped brood out of the brood nest. Replace them with empty combs or foundation (inserted to the sides of the brood rearing area- don't split the brood nest). Relocate displaced brood frames to the center of a third brood box and place honey frames on both sides of the brood combs.

- Suppress swarming instinct by "checkerboarding" the honey super located just above the broodnest: alternate full frames of honey with empty drawn comb.
- Consider switching hive positions of weak and strong hives to reduce overpopulation in strong hives and to boost strength of weaker hives.

Help – my hive is about to swarm!

Despite best efforts to manage hive conditions that can lead to swarming, it still happens. Below are a couple of swarm management techniques to try if swarm cells and original queen are present – results will vary. There are other techniques for swarm management, so do some research and be prepared for action during swarm season.

Simulate a swarm by splitting the hive. This technique requires extra equipment to complete:

- A nuc box or at least 1 hive body with top cover and bottom board (and enough frames to fill them) are needed
- Locate the original queen. Move her and 4-5 frames of brood (do not brush off bees!) and honey into a separate hive or nuc.
- Identify the two largest swarm cells to keep and cut out the rest. Put the frame(s) with these two swarm cells back into the *original* hive along with the extra frames of drawn comb. Be careful not to split remaining brood frames.
- Allow the swarm cells to mature in the original hive. If successful, look for eggs roughly 12 days after the first queen emerges, you will have a new hive to manage or give away after the queen mates. Else, if the new queen is unsuccessful or only one hive is desired, you can newspaper combine the two hives back into one hive.

Eliminate all swarm cells if the queen is still present and take steps to relieve congestion in the hive:

- Extra hive bodies and frames are needed.
- Relieve congestion in the broodnest and checkerboard frames in honey supers to complement the removal of swarm cells
- This method may not work, especially if swarm cells have already been capped.

Seek Help: If a swarm still issues from your hive and you need help managing the situation, contact a beekeeper listed on PSBA's Swarm List for help – go to http://www.pugetsoundbees.org/psba-swarm-list/