

Dearth is the stretch of weeks — usually mid-to-late summer across most of the South — when nectar dries up almost completely. It's one of the riskiest windows in the beekeeping year, not because of any single dramatic event, but because a colony that looked fine two weeks ago can be stressed, robbed, or beetle-overrun by the time you check again. This guide covers what to watch for, what to do about it, and what comes next.

## WHAT'S ACTUALLY HAPPENING

### Why Dearth Is Different From a Slow Week

A slow nectar day is normal. Dearth is sustained — days or weeks with almost nothing coming in, while the colony's population (and appetite) is often still near its summer peak. That mismatch between mouths to feed and food coming in the door is what drives most of the problems below.

## RECOGNIZE IT EARLY

### Signs Dearth Has Started

- Foragers returning empty — little to no pollen or nectar visible on incoming bees
- Bearding or fanning increases, even outside of heat-related causes
- Bees become noticeably more defensive or irritable during inspections
- Drone bees may be evicted from the hive (a sign stores are tightening)
- Fighting or unusual activity at the entrance — early robbing behavior
- Capped honey stores visibly shrinking between inspections

## KEEP THEM FED

### Feeding During Dearth

Once dearth sets in, the colony is living off stored reserves. If those reserves are thin, feeding bridges the gap until the fall flow (goldenrod, aster) picks up.

- **1:1 sugar syrup** if stores are light but not critical — stimulates without overfeeding
- **2:1 sugar syrup** if stores are genuinely low — denser, closer to honey, less work for bees to process
- Feed inside the hive (frame feeder or top feeder) rather than open feeding — open syrup outside the hive is an open invitation to robbers
- Check feeders every few days during dearth — they empty fast when there's no competing forage

#### RULE OF THUMB

If you lift the back of the hive and it feels noticeably lighter than it did a few weeks ago, don't wait for a full inspection to start feeding. Dearth stress compounds fast.

## DEFEND THE ENTRANCE

### Managing Robbing Pressure

When forage disappears, strong colonies (and wasps) will test weaker hives for an easy meal. Robbing can escalate from a few scout bees to a full-blown free-for-all in under an hour if it's not caught early.

- Reduce entrances to a single bee-width opening during dearth — gives guard bees a chokepoint they can actually defend
- Watch for the telltale signs: bees grappling at the entrance, a 'figure-8' weaving flight pattern, torn-up wax debris on the landing board
- Never feed syrup in the open yard during dearth — feed inside the hive only
- If robbing is already underway, reduce the entrance further (or close briefly with a damp towel) and let it settle before reopening
- Weaker or smaller colonies are most at risk — give them extra attention during this window

## WATCH THE BEETLES

### Small Hive Beetle Pressure

SHB pressure typically peaks right alongside dearth in the South — stressed colonies have less energy to spend chasing beetles, and the beetles know it.

- Check oil traps weekly during dearth, not just at routine inspections
- Keep Swiffer sheets fresh and tacky — replace as soon as they lose grip
- A reduced entrance (already in place for robbing control) also helps limit beetle access
- If you see SHB larvae, that's a critical-level signal — act immediately rather than waiting for the next scheduled check

## LOOKING AHEAD

### What to Watch For Heading Into Fall

Dearth doesn't last forever. As it breaks — usually when goldenrod and aster start blooming — the colony shifts gears again. Here's what that transition looks like and what to do about it.

- Fall nectar flow (goldenrod/aster) typically begins easing dearth in September across most of Zone 7-8
- Watch population rebuild — queens ramp laying back up to produce strong winter bees
- This is your last real varroa treatment window before winter bees are raised — treat now if levels are elevated
- Confirm winter stores are on track — most zones need 60-80 lbs of capped honey going into fall/winter
- SHB pressure usually eases as temperatures drop, but don't let your guard down too early

#### DON'T STOP WATCHING TOO SOON

The biggest mistake after dearth breaks is relaxing too fast. A colony that just survived weeks of stress needs a few solid inspections to confirm it's actually recovering — queen still laying well, population rebuilding, stores trending up — before you can call it settled.

## PRINT & KEEP IN THE BEE YARD

### Dearth Quick-Reference Checklist

DURING DEARTH

DONE

# Summer Dearth Survival Guide

Recognizing dearth, feeding right, managing robbing, and watching for fall

Reduce entrances on all hives	[ ]
Begin feeding (1:1 or 2:1) if stores are light	[ ]
Check oil traps / Swiffer sheets weekly	[ ]
Watch for robbing behavior at entrances	[ ]
Heft-check stores every 1-2 weeks	[ ]
No open feeding in the yard	[ ]
<b>AS DEARTH BREAKS</b>	
Confirm fall nectar flow has started	[ ]
Run a varroa wash before winter bees are raised	[ ]
Reassess and reopen entrances gradually	[ ]
Confirm winter stores trending toward 60-80 lbs	[ ]

*Written from real first-year experience managing two hives through a Cherokee County, Alabama summer — not textbook theory. Your dearth timing and severity will vary by region; use this as a framework, not a fixed calendar. For zone-specific seasonal timing, see the free **Beekeeping Calendar** at [bootstrapbeekeeping.com/beekeeping-calendar](https://bootstrapbeekeeping.com/beekeeping-calendar).*