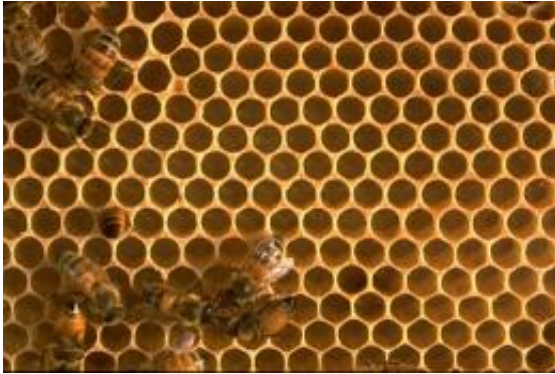


'Swindon Honeybee' could save Britain's bees

27 August 2010, by Lin Edwards



(PhysOrg.com) -- Honey bee numbers have been declining almost everywhere due to a pesticide-resistant mite called Varroa. Now a beekeeper in Britain claims to have discovered a strain of bee that destroys the parasite through grooming.

Ron Hoskins, a 79-year-old retired heating engineer from Swindon, has spent the last 18 years searching for a breed of [honey bee](#) that is resistant to the Varroa [mite](#), and has now bred a strain in which the bees remove the mites by grooming one another.

Hoskins explained the Varroa mite has spread around the globe at an alarming rate, wiping out whole colonies of bees almost everywhere except Australia. In Britain alone, researchers have found over half of the honey bees have been wiped out by infestation by the parasite, Hoskins said.

Bees are essential for crop pollination, pollinating around one third of everything we eat. According to a British environmental consultancy, ADAS, bees pollinate crops worth up to \$310 million a year in Britain. Apart from the parasite infestation, colonies are threatened by loss of habitat and diseases.

The Varroa mite originated in the Far East, spreading through Europe and becoming endemic in Britain in 1992. The mites are blood suckers and can introduce viruses and other diseases to [bee colonies](#).

Hoskins is seeking funding for further research on his "Swindon honeybee" and has received an invitation from Australian officials eager to keep the parasite problem out of Australia. The British Bee Keepers Association (BBKA) said Hoskins' findings are "potentially exciting" but the research is on a small scale and at an early stage.

Since making his chance discovery of a hive in which there were far fewer deaths than in all the other hives, Hoskins has been artificially inseminating queen bees with the goal of helping the new strain establish itself. He does not expect the new strain to be available for sale for some years.

Other researchers have also developed bees that groom each other and remove dead pupae and larvae from hives, but according to US scientists such hygienic bees tend to make less honey and they can be more aggressive.

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