

Sunnyside Smallholding;

Expect the unexpected

The autumn equinox, when day and night are the same length and autumn officially starts, is 22nd September. As autumn arrives, the smallholding suddenly changes. The mornings are cool and damp. The nights are drawing in and the chilly evenings prompt nationwide discussions about when to put on the heating. The orchard trees lose their leaves and the vegetable garden is half empty. The prospect of the coming winter can seem gloomy but the wood stores are full, so are the freezers and the pantry shelves are groaning under the weight of jams, picked veg, chutneys and honey. Our stores provide a sense of satisfaction and achievement that the year's efforts have prepared us well for winter. It is also a time to look back on the year and contemplate how things went. Every year is different and this year was dominated by hot, extremely dry weather and a sudden, unexpected, very late honey flow from the bees.

Honey is probably the most fascinating produce from the smallholding. Bees collect tiny amounts of nectar from flowers and turn it into a magical, sweet, nutritious and long-lasting syrup that has many health benefits but tastes like it came from the gods. It takes 12 bees to produce a teaspoon of honey in their lifetime. To fill a 1lb jar, bees will fly up to 90,000 miles and visit up to 2 million flowers. The total nectar gathering distance travelled by a large colony of bees in a day would take them all around the earth. No wonder they are well known for being busy.

Unfortunately, not all honey is the same. Cheap, blended honey from the supermarkets bears little resemblance to the genuine product sold by a beekeeper. Keep this in mind when buying honey.

In a normal beekeeping year, August is the end of the honey season. Flowers are fading



and the beekeeper takes their last crop of honey leaving enough for the bees to enjoy over the flowerless winter months when they rely on their stored honey to survive. This year was different. I took what I thought was the last honey of the year and returned the empty honey comb to the hive for the bees to clean up the sticky remnants. A few weeks later, I went to remove the cleaned, empty combs to find them crammed full of fresh honey. The speed of this honey flow was like late spring when there is flowering blossom everywhere. I am still very puzzled as to which September flowers the bees had found in sufficient numbers to make all this honey. The good news is, it's not only the bees (and beekeeper) that has benefited from the late honeyflow, every other pollen and nectar collecting insect will also have had an unexpected feast.

At the time of writing, I have been harvesting and storing some bright orange pumpkins. I've also been collecting sweet chestnuts. Both indicating that we are firmly into autumn. This chilly evening, with the log burner glowing, I think I will roast some of those chestnuts, enjoy a honey based 'hot toddy' and wonder when the summer suddenly faded away.