

Information Sheet - Organic Honey (in London you must be joking)

Background:

Honey is sometimes sold as being “Organic” and may come from various countries of origin. The European Union and the Soil Association both have a say on the question of organics and the definition varies on the exact terms. Other countries’ standards vary considerably. The standards for honey production are very stringent and one wonders if it would really be worth even to try. I will leave you to make up your own mind.

Summary of the Key Standards for Organic Honey Production:

1. Siting of Apiary – must be on certified organic land that must not be treated with weed killers etc. The beekeeper must keep a map showing the location of all his/her apiaries.
2. Hives (inc frames) – must be made of natural, untreated timber. (no plastics) Hives must not be painted, but may be treated with linseed oil.
3. Conversion period – 12 months of organic management, during which time the wax must be changed to organic wax.
4. Origin of bees – 10% of the hives in an apiary can be replaced/increased using non-organic queens or swarms, provided that organic wax (from organic hives) is used. In this case the 12 month conversion period does not apply.
5. Foundation and comb – must be of organic wax, except when an apiary is first converted and organic wax is unavailable.
6. Foraging – for a radius of 3km (EU regs) or 4 miles (Soil Association) around the apiary, nectar and pollen sources must be “essentially” either organic or wild/uncultivated. This area must not be subject to significant sources of pollution from eg: motorways, urban centres, dumps, incinerators, etc.. (what hope do we have?) This is the only significant difference between the EU and the Soil Association standards in the area of honey production.
7. Feeding – must be organic honey (one of the Eurocratic eccentricities!) or organic sugar (white refined - not always available?) and this may only take place between the last honey harvest and 15 days before the first nectar flow.
8. Disease control – similar to other livestock husbandry, the priority is to build up good health and vitality through positive management practices. Homeopathic and herbal treatments and natural acids (Lactic, formic and oxalic) and thymol may be used without restriction. Other medication requires veterinary prescription, the wax must be replaced and there must be a withdrawal period of one year. The use of medications such as “fumidil B” for nosema, is not allowed, although pressure is on for its use because of Nosema Ceranae” (USA allow its use). Drone culling is OK, although it disturbs natural colony activity.
9. Queen rearing – artificial insemination is allowed but wing clipping is prohibited.
10. Extraction and bottling – no requirements beyond the normal measures to ensure separation and product integrity.

Conclusion:

It will be impossible to meet these standards in London and I consider that it would be illegal to sell our honey as organic. Countryside beekeepers will have to establish if the 4 mile radius around the apiary is organic (this amounts to 50 square miles) before starting. National Parks are probably the only safe locations. The number of UK beekeepers that will be able to meet these standards will be very few indeed, except for, perhaps, heather honey producers. Any imported honey with an “organic” label should be treated with caution.

Information above has been helped by an article from the BBKA News – Dec 2002 & revised using articles in BeeCraft April/May 2010.

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