

What did bees eat?

Researchers from Alterra, part of Wageningen UR, and the European Invertebrate Survey in Leiden are going to dust off museum collections in search of old pollen. They want to get an impression of the food that was available to wild bees over the past few centuries. The study is part of a larger research on the alarming fall in bee numbers.

Among the possible causes for the decline of the honey bee in recent years are changes in vegetation and landscapes. It is known, for example, that clover, which is important for bumble bees, is much scarcer than it used to be.

Last year the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality allocated one million euros to a research programme on the reasons for declining bee populations. The Dutch Centre for Bee Research (NCB) is going to measure the losses among beekeepers, while ecologists will try to quantify the decline in wild bee populations. Plant Research International (PRI), part of Wageningen UR, is conducting in-depth research on the vitality of bee populations, disease levels, food and beekeeping. This will include research on the impact of

the Varroa mite.

The cause of the high death rate in bee populations is still far from clear. One explanation points the finger at the Varroa mite as the chief disease carrier, while the other blames high environmental concentrations of pesticides. Sjeff van der Steen of PRI: 'European bee researchers stick to the theory that the Varroa mite and wrong beekeeping techniques are the main reasons for the bee death rate. On the other hand, there is a group of researchers who are convinced that pesticides play a role. That has been researched in French and German studies. Ninety percent of the bees have been found to carry pesticide residues, but no link with the death rate has been proven.' Info: sjef.vandersteen@wur.nl



Sustainable biofuels come from the tropics

Palm oil from South-east Asia, sugar cane from Brazil and sorghum from China are the most sustainable energy crops at the moment. The environmental impact of maize or wheat as energy crops is much greater. The Plant Production Systems chair group at Wageningen University tested nine energy crops against sustainability criteria. Oil palms, sugar cane and sorghum make the most efficient use of land, water, nitrogen and pesticides relative to the amount of energy they produce. If no forest is cut down for them, they produce far smaller quantities of greenhouse gases than fossil fuels do, say the researchers. Major energy crops such as maize in the US and wheat in Europe score much lower on nearly all the sustainability criteria. Sugar beet and oil seed rape (Europe), cassava (Thailand) and soya (Brazil) scored in the middle range. The Wageningen researchers' findings are published in *Biomass and Bioenergy*. Info: sander.devries@wur.nl

Surinamese women want to enjoy their food

For women from Suriname or the Antilles, the advantages of healthy eating are outweighed by the disadvantages. This finding has come out of research done by the LEI, part of Wageningen UR, on what stops these women from adopting healthier eating habits.

Overweight is more common among people from Suriname and the Antilles than among 'indigenous' Dutch people. Along with age, sex and socio-economic status, ethnicity plays a significant role in this. The women interviewed told researchers that healthy food didn't taste as good. Their ideal figure is also larger and they are not convinced of the link between healthy eating and losing weight, or of the health risks of overweight. Info: elvi.vanwijk@wur.nl