

WINES&VINES

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Tips on Bird Control

Until effective chemical repellents become available again, the traditional methods of bird control — netting, visual scare devices and noise devices — are the principal choices open to growers. The best method of control for you may depend on the nature of the problem in your individual vineyard.

Netting is the most effective way of reducing bird damage. The major disadvantages are the high initial cost, the amount of time involved in applying and removing it, and the inconvenience of working around it. If used with time and patience, it can last between 7 and 11 years. Various methods of installing and removing netting exist, ranging from hydraulically operated reels to more labor-intensive methods not requiring special equipment.

A number of different kinds of netting are available. Extruded netting comes in a square or diamond mesh. Netting with a square mesh tries to stay square; netting with a diamond mesh flexes and tries to revert to its original shape. Common mesh sizes are 5/8" x 5/8" and 3/4" x 3/4". Larger sizes are available, but at 1-1/4" small birds can start to get through. Black polypropylene netting is always ultraviolet stabilized and lasts longest; green polypropylene netting is usually ultraviolet stabilized and although it does not last as long, reflects light and may help repel birds. The thickness of the mesh also contributes to the life of netting.

If netting is not used, an integrated approach to bird control gives the best chance of success. This involves planning and using a variety of bird control devices, both visual and audio. It is important that the grower identify the birds that are causing a problem. The type of damage caused, the amount of damage, and the method of control varies from one species to another.

Other factors enter into the selection process: Where are the birds coming from? Are they migratory birds passing through? If they are what might be called "home" birds, which arrive in the spring, nest, and stay until fall, are they nesting in nearby wood lots, tree lines or brush? Are they coming along flight lines from area wetlands, creeks, rivers or utility lines? What time of day does the greatest bird pressure come? Is there greater damage around the perimeter or in the middle of the field? Do the birds come in flocks or individually?

A number of strategies depend on the answers to these questions. Noise devices can be aimed at the flight paths used by birds and can be set for the time of day when the birds are most actively feeding. Flocks are generally easier to scare off than individual birds.

Visual devices such as scare balloons, scare hawks and streamers should be placed out in the vineyard a week or two before the grapes become colored or start to soften, and they should be changed every two to three weeks. Noise devices can be placed in two different categories. The cannon is an impulse scarer that scares immediately by producing unexpected and often random shocks. Electronic sound generation systems create hostile and unbearable environments that take some time to work. The two

kinds of audio devices work best together when the birds are already on edge. Using visual deterrents and acoustical sound together can provide the grower with a varied bag of tricks. Birds become harder to control the closer it gets to harvest, and it helps to bring out something different.

The cost of bird control should not exceed what your actual loss to birds has been, starting with records of amounts of damage. Keep track of the control methods you use, when you used them, and how successful they were. Learn what methods are available by requesting catalogs and instructional material from dealers. Some are very knowledgeable about birds and will answer your questions and recommend a method based on your particular situation.