

DUCK CREEK MOUNTAIN FRUITS

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Profitability and Best Practice in Orchards

My husband and I moved to the far north coast of NSW from Sydney 30 years ago. We bought a property and planted custard apples in 1980, then stone-fruit (nectarines and peaches) in 1983.

For the first four years, we had only a little trouble from flying foxes but as more orchards went in and less rainforest trees were available, they became a major problem to us with our stone-fruit crop.

Most orchardists at that time would try shooting the flying foxes as they came into the orchards. The noise of the shooting would keep them at bay for a short while but as soon as you stopped shooting, they would return. **We found the practice totally ineffective, as were noise machines and flashing lights.**

In 1988, we commenced netting part of our orchard. In 1989, with only one-third of the orchard netted, we lost 90% of the fruit from the un-netted orchard. In 1990, we netted our entire stone-fruit orchard with 48mm netting. **In the following year the profits from our protected crop paid for the netting structure erected that year.** Nearly 20 years later, we have the same nets and structure in place. If erected correctly and maintained they should last a few more years.

With netting over our orchard we have peace of mind during the harvest; no damage to the fruit from flying foxes, birds or possums - and we are preserving our wildlife. **Stone-fruit is a profitable crop when grown under netting. The cost of the netting structure is well and truly cost-effective.**

In the future we plan to put netting over some of our high valued custard apples. We believe this will be the way to profitable horticulture in the future.

Patti Stacey
Secretary
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Hail-nets way to go for top price fruit

The planting of stone-fruit, i.e. the “Californian variety low-chill”, started on the North Coast of NSW around 1983. By 1986 our local association, the Exotic Fruit Growers Association (EFGA), adopted the idea of netting orchards to protect fruit from bat (flying fox) damage. It was agreed that 100 mm net would stop bats from flying in and destroying the fruit although some continued to land on the net and crawl through it. By 1989 the netting was modified to 44 mm to provide complete exclusion.

Hindsight has taught us that the flying fox will only eat fruit when the pollen has been washed out of the eucalypts and other native trees during heavy rains.

About six years ago we opted to install hail net over new trees (while retaining the bat net over the older trees). This not only continued to exclude flying foxes but also birds and, of course, hail damage. Despite it being twice the cost of bat-net it has saved our crops on several occasions, giving us a very competitive edge. This year we got top price for our fruit in a market where many orchardists had been wiped out by hail.

Twenty years later our bat-net is still working. Although the hail net is twice the price and requires a fair bit of maintenance, we will continue to use it. Without the nets, we would not have continued with the fruit growing.

We do not agree with the shooting of native birds and bats. It may seem like an easy way out but it does little to improve profitability. Nets have saved our crops and therefore our profits 100 per cent.

John Gough

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