

It's A 'Dog' Day For And Pesky Blackbirds Arrive

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LEESPORT (Berks Co.) — In the battle to control orchard rodents, the weapons can be awesome.
To control blackbirds and star-

lings from dining on blueberries, one Berks County orchard manager makes use of a variety of weapons, including reflective tape, propane gun, floating eyeballs, and whatever else is needed.
Another orchardist makes use of

dogs.
Dogs? That's right. Weaver's Orchard in Morgantown, Berks County, makes use of crossbred dogs of various breeds to provide what they consider an "Off-Limits Pest Control System." For the wary traveler, signs are posted at the entrance to the farm along road frontage near Rt. 10.

Orchardists are making use of all sorts of techniques to ward off fruit and vegetable pests. And the methods often prove effective.

More than 85 members and friends of the State Horticultural Association of Pennsylvania found out firsthand what some growers are doing to control crop-damaging rodents on several orchards on a two-day tour in Berks County on Wednesday and Thursday last week at the annual Summer Orchard Tour.

Douglas E. Nemeth, orchard operations manager for Ontelaunee Orchards, Inc. in Leesport, indicated that in the war to control pests such as birds, no matter what you do, "the birds get used to about most everything."

On the five acres of lush blueberries at Ontelaunee, Nemeth said there have been some years where the birds "absolutely cleaned house in here." The birds include

blackbirds and starlings. A friend who has an orchard in the New Jersey pine barrens, which is devoid of those kinds of birds, blames the problem on orchards close to towns, indicated Nemeth.

As a result, Nemeth said he makes limited use of reflective tape, which is red on one side and silver on the other, to help control the birds, which can cause extensive damage to blueberries and other crops. The silver decorative tape, like a scarecrow, wards them away.

Ontelaunee also uses a propane gun, floating eyes, and snake "things" in the war against the birds.

During the winter, deer can make quick lunch of growth on fruit trees. During the summer, deer simply love pumpkins.

One time, Ed Weaver, orchard manager for Weaver's Orchard in Morgantown, planted some pumpkin on the slope of a hill next to a forest. Deer completely decimated the crop.

Weaver noted that mice can burrow into and surround the base of a tree. And fruit and vegetable growers are well aware of what damage groundhogs and raccoons cause.

Previous rodent control methods, such as soap, hair, chemicals, and lead proved insufficient. So two years ago, fed up with the problems of rodent damage, Weaver went to work. He did some research on a system used by several growers that made use of dogs. He spent \$5,600, which included the wiring and transmitter, and less than an average of \$30 per dog extra.

Installation of the off-limits pest control system was another \$1,000. For less than \$10,000, Weaver had a complete system to protect the orchard's 70 acres of tree fruit, eight acres of strawberries, 1/2 acre of blueberries, one acre of raspberries, 12 acres of sweet corn, and five acres of pumpkins from pests, including deer and groundhogs. Weaver believes that the rodent control system saves him \$40,000 per year on lost product.

At the time he started, Weaver mapped out one zone and used one dog. A year ago he added three zones and seven dogs. Today there are eight dogs — three Norwegian Elkhounds, one Husky/Akita, one Husky/Shepherd/Lab, one German Shepherd, and two Beagles.



Mike Field, Snipes Farm and Nursery, Morrisville, left, inspects the Red Delicious apple trees at Ontelaunee with Dave Huber, also with Snipes.



Anne Weaver, with one of the pest control dogs, Oreo, at Weaver's Orchard.



Weaver's manages five acres of pick-your-own strawberries. All of the crop is trickle irrigated, according to Ed Weaver, far right. Varieties grown include Delmarvel, Sweet Charlie, Early Glow, Raritan, Jewel, Off-Star, Early Glow with Guardian, and Late Glow.



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