

Using Netting for Bird Control in Blueberries

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We have used netting on our blueberry planting since the very first fruit were harvested in 1999. I often hear growers say, "I can't afford to put netting over my blueberries." However, I believe you can't afford NOT to put netting on a blueberry planting, unless you are in the middle of nowhere, miles from any trees for birds to roost in. As a capital investment, it's just as important as an irrigation system, and attaining the proper pH before planting.

As with other capital purchases, you CAN spend lots of money on a netting system. Or you can settle for what's workable and not too expensive. I started my netting system by using pairs of metal t-posts, spaced 12 plants apart in the row, 6 pairs in a row. I strung inexpensive small diameter electric fence wire from post to post down the length of the row on each side, and used this as a support for 17 foot wide bird netting. We would make sure we mowed the inter-row area just before putting out the netting. Ideally the netting was deployed when the very first berry just started to show the first touch of blue; often it did not go out until more berries were starting to turn (it always happens during strawberry season after all). In early September, we would roll the netting back up and put it in the barn under cover until the next season. This system worked well when the plants were still small and had not attained full size.

Once the plants reached close to their full width, we started to have problems with the netting catching on the berries each time it was raised for harvest. At that point, we had some 2.5 inch by 2.5 inch tamarack posts milled for us and replaced the metal t-posts with the wooden posts spaced further away from the plants. We continued to use the same electric fence wire as before, wrapped around each post, before continuing on to the next post. We also continued to drape the netting over each row individually.

My H2A crew felt that they were still having problems with the netting catching on the plants, and after one particularly strong thunderstorm that plastered the netting against the north side of every bush, my field crew took it upon themselves one day to fix the situation. They took some unused tomato twine, and strung it between posts perpendicular to the blueberry rows. They lifted the netting off each individual row and laid the pieces on top of the support wires and twine across the whole planting with side panels along each side of the planting. They quickly used more tomato twine to weave the edges of the netting together so we had a solid covering over the entire planting. At the end of the season, they pulled out the twine that weaves the sides together, rolled up the netting, and put it back in the barn.

Now that the blueberries are reaching mature size, we have to modify the system one more time. When we put in the initial wooden posts, we used 8 foot posts, buried 18 inches in the ground. The plants have started bumping up against the netting too much during the growing season. So we are converting to ten foot posts. In some cases we're just replacing posts with longer posts, in other cases, one of our field crew is adding additional height to the existing posts. If I were starting from scratch, I would use at least ten foot long posts, perhaps twelve foot long.

The system isn't perfect, but for the price, it has done a great job for us. An occasional bird gets through an occasional hole that opens up, but I think that is going to happen with just about any type of system. Netting can seem like a large up-front cost, but I am still using 75% of the netting that I purchased in 1999. My current planting size requires 5 rolls of 17 x 500 foot netting. In the summer of 2011, one roll cost \$365, 5 rolls would be \$1825. I can cover that in one day of blueberry sales at one farmer's market and our farm stand. Customers want large, sweet blueberries. The yields that we are able to obtain off a small planting, and the quality that we produce that allows us to receive top dollar would not be possible without netting. When one looks at the investment needed to get a viable blueberry planting to production stage, surely netting is a small cost to add to ensure quality and yield.