

NETTING FRUIT TREES SAFELY



Salisbury's history includes being a region of commercial stone fruit and citrus orchards, and our climate is suitable to grow plants from cool temperate to subtropical zones as well. Allowing a wide variety of fruit trees species that may grow in your backyard as resident of this region. And who doesn't think the taste of a fresh peach or plum from your backyard tree is fabulous: so juicy and fresh, and well worth the efforts of growing fruit trees at home. The problem being, birds, possums, fruit bats and rats also cherish these delights as much as we do; making netting fruit trees essential if you want to have some fruit for yourself and to share with friends and family.

However, the actions of covering fruit trees with bird netting has challenges: any sharp edge may rip it; it can be difficult to handle the netting to place over your frame, and involve precariously balancing on a ladder making it a dangerous activity, especially to do alone. Reducing the risk of injury – falling off a ladder; or shoulder injury from lifting weight above your shoulders when putting on bird netting is possible, and in this article we'll look at some factors making it a safer task. Which ones apply will depend on your circumstances including the size and location of the tree.

Ideally, you initially trained the tree into a good shape for fruiting and kept it pruned so it stayed at a manageable height (as the nectarine pictured below left). You will appreciate this forward planning and directive pruning, when you can easily cast netting over a low height frame, as the nectarine pictured below right), and secure it on the ground and walk away confidently that nothing can get in. If you are starting a new orchard thinking about how you are going to net is a good idea if you want fruit!



A nectarine tree (approx. 5 years old) after a winter prune is being trained to keep it small for manageable netting. This tree had not been pruned for two winters and had a lot of summer growth, and it has taken two years to bring it to its current manageable – easy to net, height.

The reality for many of us, is that we have inherited advanced fruit trees in our yards, or ourselves planted them and allow them to grow wide and tall. Whilst in our youth climbing a ladder was not much of an issue, netting was easy, but in our more senior years the risks of climbing and balancing precariously whilst feeding netting on are not worth it. Yet, we need to net if we still want the harvest.

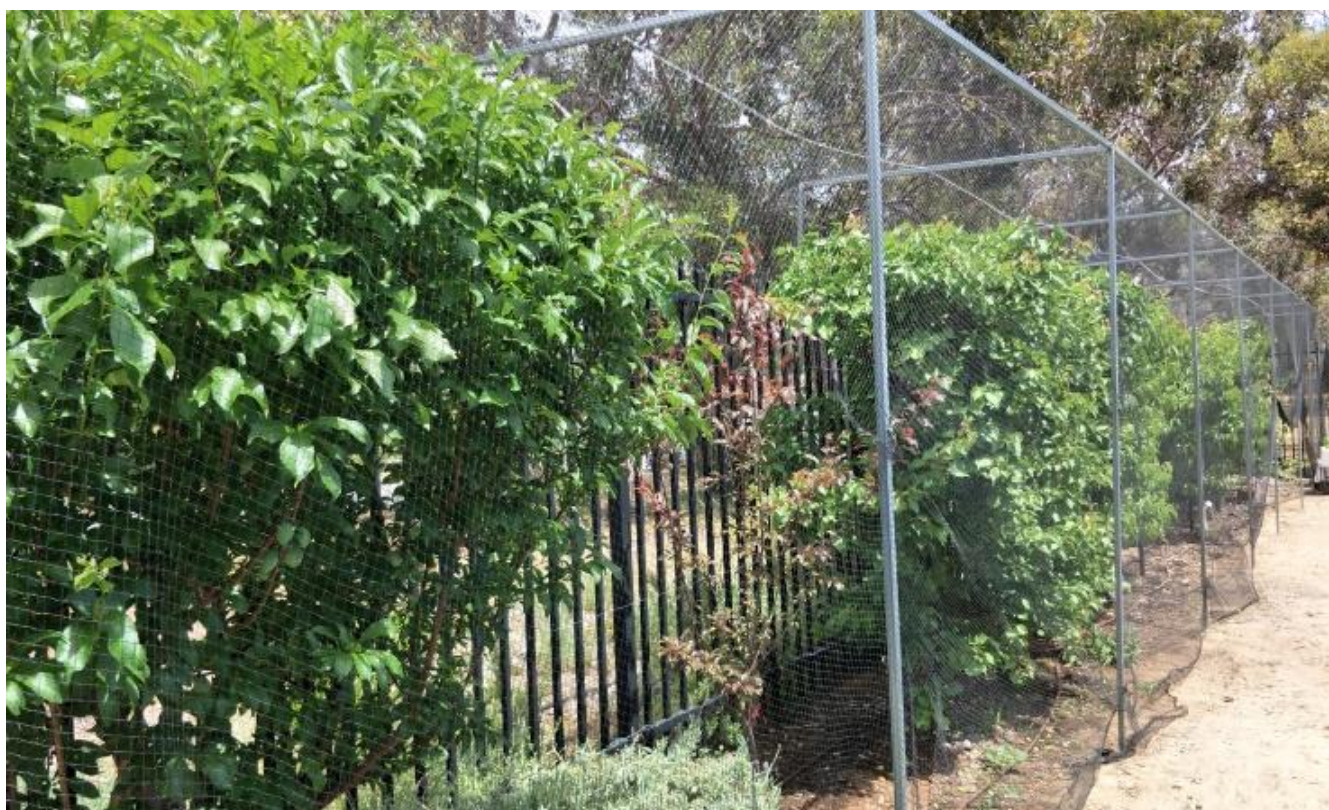
If your tree is tall you may consider seeking professional advice on how to prune it back in stages to reduce its height- you'll have less fruit for a while. Or replacing it and starting again; where you can prune and train to keep the tree to a manageable height as many commercial orchardists do, and us home growers with smaller backyards are starting to adapt to. You don't need to buy dwarf fruit trees for the smaller height if you are planting multipole trees you can plant them close together (even 1metre apart)and they will compete for resources and this will reduce their size.

As for frames for bird netting consider the following: its not long that the netting is required but any structure you put in place needs to have sufficient strength and stability to withstand strong winds, being knocked by humans and/or pets, and birds perching on it. Its dimensions (height and width) need to allow enough space around the fruit so birds can't get to them, for you to safely manage any pruning and harvesting.

There are various ways to build, stable structures to place netting over: they can be a permanent feature of the garden like an aviary, or semi-permanent protecting the trees for a few weeks until the fruit is harvest.

Permanent options examples include:

Building structures that cover the entire back yards of bird netting which is convenient for an extensive orchard and making it easy to walk under and work. Often these are constructed with a central pole like a circus tent or aviary style. Aviary style with netting permanently on and rolled up on sides for access, or aviary wire with a more solid door. Sharp metal ends need to be covered to stop the netting tearing.



Solid structure like a bird aviary is easy to walk in

Semi-permanent options include:

Firm irrigation. Slide them over reinforcing rod and slide irrigation pipe on top of this or make a self-supporting structure.



You can reinforce 19mm irrigation pipe by sliding 13mm irrigation pipe inside it, or buy the more expensive irrigation with the blue stripe that is firmer and more self-supporting.



Electrical conduit can be easy to install, with joiners an off the shelf product.



A temporary throw over when you need is easy if the tree is small



Brooms are useful to lift to top height if the trees are tall.

Factors in solving the how to net effectively, reasonable easily and safely problem include:

Height of frame the net will rest on. The netting structure needs to be high enough to allow for summer growth. Otherwise you will be pruning it away from the netting.

Picture shows a frame too low. As it doesn't allow for summer growth and lots of pruning will be necessary to stop it going through the netting and ruining it.



Solve by raising the top.



Solve by raising the supports



Space around fruit High and wide enough so that birds and other critters won't sit on the branches and reach the fruit.

Picture to the left is not effective netting as access to the fruit is easy for everyone but humans!

Picture below is hard for birds to access.





Sturdy The structure needs to be sturdy to deal with wind, animals and you to work in and around. Star droppers can be used as uprights but can be difficult to fit irrigation pipe tops onto. We use start droppers to secure the conduit onto to make the free-standing structures more stable.

The cross-over tops of these structures need to be secured to make structure study. Cable ties, rope or tape work well.



Secured all around The bottoms of the nets need to be secure as well as no gaps around as birds, possums, fruit bats and rats are smart and will for and more through loose areas and gaps. Star droppers, bricks or pieces of wood can be placed on the ground but can be a tripping hazard. The nets can be bundled up held in place with tent pegs, bricks or clips

Timing- before it gets eaten The netting needs to be put in place in good time before the birds and other creatures start feasting. So you either net early, or are around to cover fruit trees in haste, and have things in place to do this effectively.

CONSIDERATIONS

Allow enough internal height for at least 600mm of summer growth, fruit needs some leaf protection from harsh summer sun. Tip pruning can keep growth under netting

- Don't over fertilise nor water fruit trees, as this will encourage excessive leaf growth and extra work in pruning.
- Summer pruning tips:
Stone fruit: can trim back new growth once 600mm in length. Apricots can have their main pruning after fruiting
- Apples and pears: prune out string vertical shoots (except leaders)
- If your trees are already tall you could consider planting new ones, or seeking professional advice to prune them to a height the make netting easier.
- Post-harvest the nets can be removed.

Home Assist can assist eligible people to put on their bird netting through a MAC referral.



Compiled by Shannan Davis, January, 2020
Paralowie Communal Garden Coordinator, 8406 8525

