

# RUTGERS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

NEW JERSEY AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION

## Blackbirds in the Vegetable Garden

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### Damage:

Blackbirds have a mixed diet, eating both insects and small animals, as well as many vegetables (lettuce, peppers, tomatoes, sweet corn) and seeds (sunflowers, sorghum, grains). They can unearth and eat planted seed or feed on newly sprouted seedlings. Occasionally, they will eat buds and flowers, reducing fruit set. Often, these pests will be very destructive by damaging mature fruit, such as peppers, strawberries, tomatoes, and sweet corn - usually the day before you planned to harvest.

### Description:

The term "blackbird" loosely refers to a group of about a half-dozen species of birds; the males are black or dark in color and are omnivorous (diet includes grains, weeds, fruits, insects and other small organisms). They include the red-winged blackbird, grackles, cowbirds, starlings, and other blackbirds.



*Starling*



*Red-winged blackbird*

### Life History:

The different species have various nesting and feeding habits but, in general, these birds eat mainly insects during the nesting season (May-July), with their diet shifting to vegetative matter in late summer through late fall. Damage may be more severe during dry periods, as birds attack succulent fruit for moisture. They may or may not migrate, and will lay two to four eggs in late spring. Generally, they feed in flocks and roost at night in large groups, often with several species mixed together.

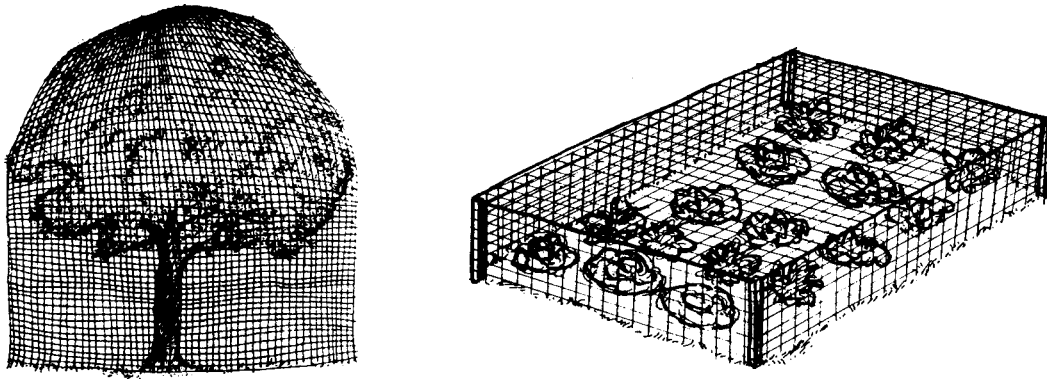


Fig. 1. Left: bird netting over fruit tree; right: wire mesh over vegetable crop

### Nonchemical Control:

1. Light-weight reusable plastic netting, cheese cloth, or wire mesh can be placed over the crop or seed bed to be protected (Fig. 1). Use soil or stakes to secure the edges. Netting must fit close to the crop because birds can get underneath netting with gaps.
2. Paper bags can be placed over the ears of sweet corn after pollen shed is complete or after silks are brown. Sweet corn ears with long, tight husks are more resistant to bird damage than short, loose-husk varieties.
3. Timing of harvest is important. Sunflowers are attractive to birds after the seeds mature, and should be harvested immediately.
4. Use transplants instead of seed whenever possible, especially when planting cauliflower, brussels sprouts, broccoli, and lettuce.
5. Stakes and flags are often effective. Stakes can be placed in the garden with strips of cloth attached to the tops. Tack the flag to the end of the stake or tie it on with a short string. Space the stakes every 15 to 20 feet in all directions.

6. Another method is to run string from stake to stake and fasten cloth or plastic streamers to the string at 5-foot intervals. Twirlers, shiny propellers, and bright objects that flash in the sunlight also work. Note: flags, streamers, and other objects work only for 1-2 weeks until birds become accustomed to them.

### Chemical Control:

1. Toxic baits and bird repellents are not recommended or labeled for use in vegetable gardens.
2. Seed treatments or pretreated seed is available to protect seed long enough for the seedlings to become established. Obtain information concerning seed treatments at your local garden supply center.
3. Scatter several cups of naphthalene flakes or granules over the seed beds to protect the seed until plant emergence.