

Thin to win

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CULTURAL PRACTICES

Faced with rising red ink, some apple growers are skipping costly practices

such as thinning, which could blow up in their faces.

IT'S AN easy road to go down, so tempting. Think of the money you'll save! Just skip thinning for one year, that's it. Next year you'll get right back to it and everything will be right as rain, right? "Most people look at it and say 'What can happen to me this year?'" says Steve Blizzard, a former president of the International Dwarf Fruit Tree Association. "But it's a slow fuse bomb - it's a time bomb."

Blizzard, known as "Doc" to many from his years in academia back in West Virginia, is now the general manager at Valley Sweet in Tulare, CA. He also serves as the chairman of the California Apple Commission, and has witnessed some painful changes in recent years as the number of growers has declined. So he has a good sense of how tempting it is to cut corners. Just don't do it on thinning, he advises. "First off, it is kamikaze to skip thinning," he says. "You just don't come back from that mission."

Omitting thinning is particularly tempting because the effects really aren't that great in the first year. There will of course be more fruit, but having more fruit isn't such a huge advantage in today's market, particularly when it's smaller. So the money you saved on thinning might not even equal the revenue lost at the end of the year selling smaller fruit. Vicious Treadmill

But wait, says Blizzard, your nightmarish journey has just begun. All that excess fruit that first year then produces natural growth regulators in your trees (this is where that ugly phrase "biennial bearing" starts popping up) that inhibits bud formation for the following year. The only good news about that is thinning won't be so much of a problem because the poor bud formation will mean decreased yields.

The problems escalate. The lower crop load then leads to excessive vegetative growth the following year. That means - you guessed it -- higher pruning costs.

Because if you don't prune those trees hard, Blizzard says you'll be promoting biennial bearing. "To try and get that biennial bearing settled down is very difficult to do," he says. "It is critical that you maintain the proper balance between fruit and vegetative growth."

But what if you just can't afford to thin? First off, while hand thinning is preferable, Blizzard says he can understand why the cost - about \$4000 an acre - would scare anyone away. He wistfully recalls how just a decade ago, when growers were getting \$50 and \$60 a box for apples shipped to Taiwan, how \$4000 an acre was simply accepted as a cost of doing business.

"The returns were so high on Fujis, Galas, and other apples that it was no big deal," he says.

"Chemical thinning wasn't considered."

Artful Science

Today, particularly with labor costs skyrocketing, there's really no other way to go besides chemical thinning. Blizzard advises thinning as close to petal fall as possible, but before seed formation. "If you wait until small fruit appear, you've wasted a lot of the tree's energy," he says. "Why waste the energy on a fruit you don't want?"

Most growers he knows in California use NAA (1-Naphthaleneacetic acid, Amvac) or Sevin (carbaryl, Aventis) for thinning their crops. But Blizzard emphasizes that whatever you use, the most important thing is spending as much time around a person experienced in chemical thinning as possible. "I don't think any two years are the same, and no material responds the same two years in a row," he says. "There's no substitute for experience."

It's not that thinning is not a science, it is. A lot of time, research and energy has been put into thinning by top-flight scientists such as Louis Batjer and Max Williams in Washington, and Art Thompson in Maryland.

For guidelines, there are fruit production guides available for each state. But look around, because thinning is not provincial.

"The principles apply whether you're in North Carolina, Virginia, California, or Washington," says Blizzard.

Beware 'Experts' But because so much goes into thinning that has yet to be discovered, it's a field rife with pretend know-it-alls, says Blizzard. "My grandfather said, 'If anyone says he knows thinning, walk away. He doesn't know what he's talking about,'" recalls Blizzard. "It is too variable. Thinning is not a repeatable science. It is a bear."

Because thinning is so hard to get a handle on, much less pay for, it's no wonder that more and more growers are tempted to skip it. Don't, says Blizzard, who adds that it is one of the more critical elements to producing a good crop. "It's probably one of the most important cultural practices that you do in growing a tree. You let the tree get into a vegetative state, and it will cost you," he says. "Most people don't realize what a can of worms they're opening by saying, 'Let's bypass thinning this year.' I've seen people take shortcuts in thinning, and I don't think they ever recover from it."

By David Eddy

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