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THE SPRAY-THINNING OF NEWCASTLE APRICOTS

By J. CRIPPS, B.Sc. (Hort.), Adviser, Horticultural Division

THE spray-thinning of fruit trees is a difficult technique to master. Moreover, local climatic conditions increase the difficulties involved, for our warm winters tend to lead to delayed foliation which in turn means that fruit tree blossoms open over a long period and that individual trees of the same variety blossom at slightly different times.

This applies to Newcastle apricots, but provided that the grower is prepared, if necessary, to spray some of his trees on a certain day and the remainder at a later date, spray-thinning can be carried out.

The number of spray applications necessary to treat all the trees in a particular planting varies with winter temperatures. After a cold winter, when all the trees flower within two or three days, one application would be sufficient but when blossoming is spread over ten days following a warm winter, three applications may be necessary. It must be emphasised that if Newcastle apricots are to be thinned the spray must be applied when two-thirds of the blossoms are open or within two days of that date. If this is not done the effectiveness of the spray is reduced.

Having outlined the difficulties let us look on the bright side. Firstly spraying is cheap. The total cost including the spray, the labour utilised and the wear and tear on equipment is slightly less than three shillings per tree, but hand thinning may cost 21s. Furthermore spray-thinning as opposed to hand-thinning leads to a slight increase in fruit size, for the excess fruit is removed several weeks earlier.

The material used is the sodium salt of DNC dissolved in water and sold as Dinoc, a weedkiller. This material contains 35 to 36 per cent. of DNC which is only partially in solution and one pint of Dinoc should be added to nine pints of water to make ten pints of solution containing 3.5 to 3.6 per cent. of Dinoc. Six pints of this solution should be added to 100 gallons of water to make the very dilute spray required containing only 265 parts per million of NaDNC. The winter spray of DNC dissolved in oil is useless for spray-thinning.

The trees must be sprayed very thoroughly, up to four gallons of spray per tree being used, and spraying is a dirty job since DNC is a wool dye and stains the skin. Protective clothing should therefore be worn.

Spray-thinning does not necessarily completely eliminate hand-thinning and it may be necessary to hand-thin clusters of fruit which have not been sufficiently thinned by the spray. The amount of hand-thinning required will however be very small unless the trees set an exceptionally heavy crop.

It is suggested that growers who wish to follow the recommendations of this article spray-thin only half their trees and compare them with their unsprayed trees and that they contact their local adviser or instructor so that they may receive all possible assistance and advice.
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