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FENCE OUT THOSE RABBITS

By J. C. ROWBOTHAM, Horticultural Instructor, Bunbury

THERE is probably no more distressing sight to orchardists' eyes than two or three hundred young fruit trees that have been damaged by rabbits.

The neat rows of whitened trunks have been likened by some growers to a caricature of a graveyard.

The simile is quite apt, as experience shows that once a young tree, be it apple or any other kind, has had the greater part of the bark chewed and stripped off by rabbits, its chances of survival or of growing into a strong healthy tree are very slight indeed.

It has been said that one or two rabbits can ruin 100 small apple trees in one night. This fact has been brought home to at least one Donnybrook grower who has just planted out 1,000 young apples.

He made a splendid job of the preparation of the site, planted the trees in almost perfect rows, but left the completion of his rabbit proof fence for two or three days while he did something else. All that was required to finish the job of keeping out the few rabbits he knew lived in a heap of logs in a patch of scrub on the river bank, were nine chains of fencing. All the other sides were protected.

In the two nights that elapsed before the fencing was completed, the rabbits attacked three or four rows of trees. They damaged in all 214 fine young apple trees. Of these, 178 required immediate replanting. The remaining 36, although cut back severely, will be a doubtful proposition for at least a couple of seasons.

Emergency Treatment

A tree rarely recovers when the bark is substantially damaged. However it is possible to save any trees, which the rabbits have not chewed too deeply into the wood, by completely covering the wound the morning after the attack with polythene film.

This prevents drying out and induces callusing and the production of new bark. This emergency treatment has proved quite successful in the Hills Districts.

Tree Guards

Where time or lack of finance does not permit the immediate erection of a good fence some measure of protection to small trees can be given by the use of tree guards.

These guards can be of any material which can be placed around the trunk to form a barrier. One of the best is the well-known insulating sheeting sisalation.

This is tied loosely round the young trunk and cut high enough to protect as much of the tree as possible without interfering with the growth of the young branches. This height is important because a determined rabbit can reach quite high when standing on his hind legs to nibble a tree.

The benefit of using sisalation is two-fold: It will also shield the trunk from the sun and prevent burning of the bark during hot summer days. However, for certain prevention of damage by rabbits nothing takes the place of a well-constructed fence and no better advice can be given to orchardists than to fence before planting, if there is the slightest danger of damage by animals, especially rabbits.

The risk of rabbits stripping bark off apple trees is greatest when grass and clovers are at their lushest, and that is round about the time that young trees are being planted out.
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