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ALTHOUGH the 1964/65 season brought a record crop with a good proportion of high quality fruit, the year was marred by several violent hailstorms in separate parts of the South-West.

One such storm struck the Newlands and Capel areas near Donnybrook on the 29th November, 1964, and caused serious and widespread damage to apple orchards which lay in the path of the storm. A survey made soon after the damage had occurred revealed that in many cases over 90 per cent. of the apples were marked to some extent and up 80 per cent. severely marked.

Subsequently, the growers concerned suffered very heavy losses, with a large proportion of their apples being unfit for export.

Fruit Tagged

One hailstorm struck orchards in the Newlands/Upper Capel area and apples showing only slight damage were “tagged” with coloured plastic string. Apples showing more severe hail marks were also tagged using plastic string of another colour. The idea of tagging these apples was to obtain information of how many (if any) of the spotted apples would in fact outgrow their early hail marks by the time the fruit was ready to be picked. It was also hoped that the observations would give an indication of the maximum size of early hail mark which would be absorbed in the normal growth of the apple.

When a close examination was made of the apples in mid-March, it was apparent that only the very slightest of spots, barely noticeable when the fruit was tagged, could be said to have grown out.

Spots the size of a pinhead at the time of tagging were still evident at the time of picking. With this type of spotting a reasonable amount of tolerance is allowed in meeting the export requirements.

With spots larger than a pinhead in size there was again little to suggest that the spots had grown out in any way. This was all the more so if the skins had been broken. In fact, in some cases, after callousing over, the spots had appeared to increase in size with the growth of the apple.

This year’s experience has made it clear that where hail damage occurs early in the season the percentage of apples which will recover is likely to be very small indeed.

FOOTNOTE: In a heavy cropping year some growers found that the best policy was to heavily hand thin the hail marked apples early in the growing period. In irrigated orchards it was necessary to closely watch the amount of irrigation water applied to ensure that apples on heavily thinned trees did not grow beyond the sizes demanded by buyers.
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