

## Bird Netting

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**Q:** What sort of netting can I use on a cherry tree that will prevent birds from eating the cherries, and also doesn't snag birds? Also, will ground squirrels chew up the netting?

**A:** Your concerns about netting trapping birds are warranted as most of the bird netting sold for use in the home orchard traps birds and other wildlife. Because of the number of animals trapped in bird netting, some locations in Australia have banned various types of agriculture nettings to prevent harm to wildlife, including birds, lizards, snakes, and bats. The black plastic netting most commonly sold as bird nettings seems to be the worst one for trapping wildlife.

Two types of netting are suggested to prevent the entanglement of birds: Relatively stiff netting (think screen material) or flexible material with very small openings.

Netting that is fairly stiff will keep birds from getting snagged; however, it will probably be too stiff to drape over a tree. With this material you will want to construct a frame over your trees and attach the net to the frame. Or make panels and zip tie them together to form a box over shrubs or smaller trees. Stiff netting can have openings/grids of about 0.5 to 1-inch.

Flexible netting or fabrics with openings less than 0.2-inch (5-mm) will also prevent birds from getting snagged. The openings should be small enough that you cannot poke your pinky finger through the holes in the netting. In addition to the flexible, bird-friendly netting; materials such as tulle cloth (used for veils), lightweight floating row cover, and lightweight shade cloth can also be utilized to exclude birds and other wildlife from eating fruit. These materials can either be draped over trees and bushes or attached to a frame. Make sure the fruit has set before installing these types of materials over fruit trees because the openings are small and may prevent pollinating insects from reaching the flowers. If you place the netting directly on the tree, you will undoubtedly lose some fruit as the birds will land on the net and eat the fruit that is accessible. However, building a frame can be time consuming.

Master Gardener Carole Crowe installs a portable frame made of PVC pipe and fittings to cover her blueberries every summer. She says "I use a fairly stiff, plastic netting/grid to attach to the frame. I tried some flimsy "bird netting", but I snagged too many birds, which was very disheartening."

When using the flexible type of netting it is recommended that you tie the bottom of the net around the tree trunk to prevent animals from getting under the net and also to keep snakes and lizards from becoming trapped in the netting. This is not an issue if you use a stiffer netting with a frame.

I have had ground squirrels climb under the netting, but I have never had them chew through the netting. By tying the netting around the trunk, you should be able to keep the squirrels out of the fruit.