

What's Eating My Citrus?

By Deborah Birge, Fort Bend County Master Gardener

Q: What's Eating My Citrus?

It's that time of year when we receive numerous calls from the Fort Bend community asking, "What's eating my citrus?" This has become an all too often sight for home growers. Grackles begin migrating into our area about the same time as the young citrus begins to develop. These birds, along with Mockingbirds, begin pecking on young fruit. Injured peel tissue becomes blackened and develops a pock-marked, scratched surface cosmetically unacceptable for the commercial grower market. For home growers, it is considered a minor problem unless the birds penetrate the flesh, thereby spoiling the fruit.

There is speculation that most of the damage is committed by juvenile birds. They use the small junks of peel to rub their feathers. Whether this is to look slick and smell good, or to deter mites, no one knows. It could be similar to "anting" which appears to be widespread and common but not readily observed. Most information is anecdotal. More than 200 species of birds — mostly songbirds — have been observed to ant. The ants come from two subfamilies, they don't sting, and they produce defensive secretions to repel attackers. Ants in the first and largest group produce formic acid, which they eject from the tip of their abdomen. In the second subfamily, a repugnant oily liquid is secreted from anal glands.

Recommended Solution

Efforts to prevent grackle and mockingbird damage have met with only limited success. The birds become indifferent to visual exclusion methods such as flapping ribbons, twirling CDs or artificial snakes and owls. Bird netting is often suggested as a deterrent, but birds being caught in the netting with all the problems that come of that could make one think twice. Another exclusion



Bird Damage; Photo courtesy of PLANTanswer.com



Grackle; Photo courtesy of PLANTanswer.com

tactic is to spray the fruit with a kaolin clay solution. This turns the fruit white which seems to confuse the birds. The only drawback is removing all the clay if you wish to market the fruit.

Lastly, there is the use of organza bags. These bags are sold as bridal gift bags and come in a variety of sizes and colors. These bags are used as a pest exclusion on several different fruit with several different results. It does work to prevent birds from pecking the fruit but can be a tedious and thankless job to bag several hundred citrus fruit.

All in all, the bird damage is unsightly but causes no real damage to the fruit. Enjoy your summer in the cool of the house watching the cunning and colorful birds. This will remain one of the more interesting mysteries of the avian kingdom.

Source: <https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/news/science/anting-widespread-fascinating-purpose-uncertain/>