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Fruit Growers Say Fruit Trees Need Protection & Support

York Springs, Pennsylvania fourth-generation fruit grower, Aaron Lerew with son, John. Together with his uncles and cousins, Lerew cares for more than 700 acres of fruit trees, mainly apples: Gala, Honey Crisp, Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Fuji, York and Rome.

As a kid, when Aaron Lerew heard his Uncle John's apple truck coming, he would run to the side of the road and hitch a ride, spending the rest of the summer day in the orchard. During college, he spent summers working in the orchards. Today, he is the fourth generation to operate Lerew Brothers Orchards.

Together with his uncles and cousins, the 35-year-old father of four cares for more than 700 acres of fruit trees. The orchard is mainly apples: Gala, Honey Crisp, Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Fuji and Red Delicious.

"I don't want to do anything else," says the York Springs, Pennsylvania fruit grower. He explains there is always plenty of work to be done and appreciates how it changes with the seasons. Each spring the family replaces about 30 acres of old trees with new. It only takes two years for the young trees to produce fruit. Throughout the summer they protect the trees from insects, disease…and deer.

"Deer like young trees. They eat the young growth, stunting the tree or killing it all together,"

Lerew explains.

A few years ago, a doe and two fawns got into a newly planted orchard and within two weeks, they had destroyed 300 trees. Replacing the young trees cost the Lerews more than $10,000. Beyond the financial investment, replanting costs the family time and future fruit production. As a result of these losses, the family began protecting each new orchard of fruit trees by installing 8-foot Bekaert Solidlock® Fixed Knot deer exclusion fence in 2015. "It keeps them out. Now, everywhere we plant a new orchard, we put up exclusion fence," Lerew says.

Initially developed for deer farms, Bekaert's team quickly realized that the high-tensile Fixed Knot woven wire fence designed to keep deer in was equally effective for keeping them out.

"It is rewarding to help fruit growers protect their trees," says Steven Sarson, Bekaert Fence Pro and Technical Support Manager.

Throughout his nearly 30-year career, Sarson provides technical advice to installers and DIYer's. When it comes to exclusion fencing, he says it is important to remember deer would rather crawl under a fence than jump over it. "The natural tendency of deer is to go under a fence. So, make sure the gap between the ground and the fence is no more than 2-inches," Sarson explains.

There are other ways to protect orchards from deer, but the methods are not sustainable, explains Jim King. Before he and his brother John put up exclusion fence, they hung small bars of soap from their young fruit trees, sprinkled human hair around the base of the trees and sprayed the trees with an odor-based agent… "They all worked for a short time, but they would wear out before the growing season was over – or any time it rained," explains the Michigan fruit grower and co-owner of King Orchards.

In one season, deer could cost the Kings thousands of dollars. After having an exclusion fence installed, King says he has peace-of-mind. "Deer are rarely a thought anymore. They used to be constantly on my mind."

Without worrying about deer, King can focus on the family's bustling retail fruit business that caters to the many locals and tourists who enjoy Lake Michigan each summer and autumn.

King Orchards markets a large portion of their cherries and apples through road-side markets in Central Lake and Kewadin. Along with fresh fruit, visitors can enjoy apple cider, cherry juice and a large selection of baked goods. Across the U.S., customers purchase from King Orchards through their online

The King Family operates King Orchards. The family direct markets a large portion of their cherries and apples through their road-side markets in Central Lake and Kewadin, Michigan. Along with fresh fruit, visitors can enjoy apple cider as well as a large selection of baked goods.

store, www.KingOrchards.com. Cherry juice produced by King Orchards is also sold to several collegiate and professional sports teams and distributed to hard cider and mead makers, breweries, wineries and distilleries.

Providing necessary support for today's fruit trees

Located within three miles of Lake Michigan, the region is perfect for growing cherries, King explains. "The water keeps the temperature warmer in the fall and the predominant west winds blowing off the lake has a warming effect. This allows our trees a longer time to harden off before winter, so they can withstand colder temperatures that way."

In the spring, these same winds hold the fruit trees dormant longer, delaying bloom and protecting trees from late frost.

Although winds can provide benefits to fruit trees, they can wreak havoc on modern apple trees. Which is the reason today's fruit growers trellis their apple trees. "Trellises are a means to support dwarf trees," Lerew says. "Orchard trees are not the self-supporting trees people plant in their backyard."

Because each apple is hand-picked, Lerew explains trees are bred to only grow 9-to-12-feet tall. Short trees have shallow root systems. On their farm, trees are planted 3-feet apart and attached to a single-line of high-tensile 12.5 gauge Bekaert smooth trellis wire. Each trellis has multiple wires that run through the row of fruit trees. As the trees grow, crews attach its trunk and branches to the trellis wire every two to three feet.

"About the time our apple trees are ready to harvest, that's when we have to worry about hurricane-winds," Lerew says. "We use Bekaert's high tensile smooth wire because we need the wire to be strong enough to support our trees."

Tensile strength is the resistance of steel or another material to break under pressure. As Sarson explains, the greater the tensile strength, the stronger the wire is. High tensile wires are lighter yet stronger and smaller in diameter than traditional low carbon wires. Along with being able to withstand more pressure, high-tensile wire also has the ability to rebound following an extreme wind event.

To save time, labor and equipment costs, Lerew also utilizes Gripple wire joiners to tie trellis wire ends. He utilizes jumbo Gripple joiners to tension the trellis wire instead of an in-line strainer. "Two reasons I use Gripple joiners. First, they are quicker to install, and they are significantly less expensive."

To learn more about how Bekaert can help you protect and support your orchards, visit https://fencing.bekaert.com.

Want installation tips? Contact Sarson and other Bekaert Fence Pros though Bekaert's Ask The Fence Pro feature, also available on their website.