

Deer Management in Wild Blueberry Fields

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Introduction

Large and small wild blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) growers in Maine are facing an increase in browsing damage from white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Deer browse, or eat, the top few inches of wild blueberry stems during the fall and winter seasons which reduces the number of buds that enter the crop year. Damage can be extensive. The density of deer changes from the Mid-coast region with approximately 30 deer per square mile to 5 deer per square mile in the Downeast region. This means that using a variety of management tactics as part of your integrated pest management plan in the Mid-coast region is crucial. White-tailed deer follow similar patterns when traveling to food sources. Evaluating this pattern can help growers predict problematic areas and help control deer damage in the future, while also reducing food safety hazards from wildlife.

There are many products and tactics that can deter deer, but using one tactic or one product will not solve the problem. It is recommended that growers take an integrated pest management approach to deer management because to achieve adequate control, a variety of management actions must be taken. Growers may also obtain a depredation permit. However, solely using this



Deer browsed wild blueberry stem.

tactic will not solve the problem but is a good addition when using several other control methods. This guide provides management tools for small and large growers to decrease browsing damage from deer in wild blueberry fields.

Management

Fencing

One of the best ways to keep deer and other wildlife out of fields is by constructing a permanent physical barrier. Constructing a permanent tall 7 to 8-foot fence or other barrier will provide adequate control for your field.

Electric solar-powered fencing can serve as an effective deterrent for deer. However, for the fence to work properly, the grower will need to train the deer to be afraid of the electric fence. This can be done by attaching aluminum foil with peanut butter or scented fence products to the electric fence once or twice every 50 feet or between fence poles. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) can help farmers offset the cost of putting up electric fencing and have a three-year lease-to-own option. The company that supplies the fencing products is Wellscroft Fence Systems, LLC (wellscroft.com). The fence comes with fiberglass posts and half-inch wide Intellitape™. The supplies are shipped to the grower, who must install the fence with their own labor. Another fence company, Premier 1® (premier1supplies.com/deer/fencing.php) has a factsheet and instructions on how to set up different types of electric deer fencing based on what the grower is attempting to achieve.

Noise

Creating a loud and unpredictable environment can help scare deer away from the field. This can be achieved with propane cannons and cracker shells. Propane cannons must be moved frequently and set with timers at random times. Placing a propane cannon in one area and never moving it will not provide adequate control.

Cracker shells are a non-lethal option made to fit in a shotgun and make similar sounds to fireworks. They are easy to obtain, inexpensive, and easier than hunting. To use them, the grower must find where deer are entering the field and scare them with the cracker shells. They are most effective when deer are present. Another option is using whistler rounds which are similar to cracker shells but with a different sound. Cracker shells and whistlers will most likely be sold at your local outdoor or hunting store or you can find them online.

Decoys

Using a predator decoy, such as a coyote, can be used to keep deer away as well. For this to be effective the grower must move the decoy randomly and often, so animals do not suspect it is a fake. Coyote urine can also be used in high-traffic areas for deer entering the field.

Depredation

Lethal force can be used by the grower if deer are causing substantial damage and the necessary protocols are followed in Title 12: Conservation; Part 13: Inland Fisheries and Wildlife; Subpart 4: Fish and Wildlife; Chapter 921: Wildlife Causing Damage or Nuisance; §12402 (Wildlife Causing Damage or Nuisance, 2007). The statute is currently written to mandate that the deer has to be within the crop that has been damaged when it is taken. One cannot kill a deer in the woods or near their property and assume it was causing damage. One deer may be used for personal use as designated by a game warden. If there are multiple deer killed, there are programs such as Hunters for the Hungry or a food bank that may be able to use the animal to feed people in the state of Maine. These services may be seasonal, so make sure to contact them and coordinate with a game warden before killing multiple deer.

Encourage Hunting

Another option for growers is to consider allowing hunters onto their properties to harvest deer during hunting season. If a grower is unfamiliar with hunting and would like to have someone reliable come to the farm and hunt, then they can contact the Maine Farm Bureau (207.622.4111) or a local Game Warden (24-hour dispatch center, call the office nearest to you, Augusta 1.800.452.4664; Bangor 1.800.432.7381; Houlton 1.800.924.2261).

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Summary

Construct a management plan that works for your location and size. Be sure to use multiple tactics and be vigilant about using them to achieve adequate deer control. For example, set up an electric fence or physical barrier, while utilizing noise cannons and/or using cracker shells when you see deer on the crop, and encourage hunting on your farm. This is a basic example of a management plan that can be made from the suggestions above. Again, the options you combine will depend on your needs and location.

References

Wildlife Causing Damage or Nuisance, Title 12: Conservation § 12402 (2007).

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