

HORTICULTURE

Crop protection: Lasers join bird fight

ALLAN THOMPSON, The Weekly Times

November 30, 2017 2:00am



THOUSANDS of birds, including native Crimson Rosellas and Currawongs, enjoy nothing more than a feast of John Benson's blueberries.

The Cherokee farmer, whose property backs on to state forest in the Macedon Ranges, has watched helplessly over many years as the hungry birds could literally destroy his summer crop in less than a week.

"Just about every individual fruit would have at least one bird bite in it, you just can't use them then and it becomes very expensive," Mr Benson said.

He tried traditional tools to ward off the birds, including scarecrows, noisemakers and even shiny reflecting tape but they were rarely effective for long. Netting was also too expensive for his operation, which sells its fruit at local farmers markets.

So the former academic took to the internet and did "lots of hunting around the world to see what they were doing with birds".

His research led him to a company called the Bird Control Group, which uses laser technology to take advantage of a bird's natural instincts. Birds perceive an approaching laser beam as a predator and take flight to seek safety.

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📷 Light brigade: Rita and John Benson use lasers to scare off the thousands of native birds that have been feasting on their blueberry crop. Pictures: Zoe Phillips





The machine fires out the laser beams using a combination of highly precise optics, filtering and light frequencies. Called the Agrilaser Autonomic it is said to be an environmentally friendly and silent solution that is not harmful to birds.

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Even so, he feels with more experimentation, he can achieve even better results by mixing the patterns, rotations, direction and heights of the lasers, or even using two laser machines simultaneously so the birds don't get used to it. He has discovered it is extremely effective used in combination with traditional bird control measures.

"Run the laser with predator bird sounds and I'm hoping there won't be a bird in sight," Mr Benson said.

He also suspected the lasers were deterring kangaroos and wallabies from entering his property.

However, the new technology didn't seem to concern the area's ever increasing deer population, who don't seem at all perturbed by the lasers and needed different control measures, he said.



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