



Project Summary

Strawberries Rock!



Introduction

Damage to strawberries by birds was reported by Buzz Club volunteers, along with questions about an unusual method of safe deterrence: 'Strawberry Rocks'. Birds have excellent colour vision and learn quickly, so the idea is that putting red-painted stones in a strawberry patch will mean that visiting birds learn that 'red things' found there are not food – and thus leave the subsequent red crop alone.

Aims

To compare damage incurred by fruit on strawberry plants surrounded by painted rocks – red or green (as a control). Participants were asked to use **one** colour rocks (both only if they had plants far apart, such as front and back garden), and record weekly the numbers of: unripe fruit, ripe fruit, picked fruit and damaged fruit, for comparison.



Results summary

The project ran from 2019-21, but had difficulties; further [detailed in our newsletters](#). 2019 only had 5 sites, although since results suggested possible success with the red stones, it was continued with an aim to do more in-person sessions. COVID-19 precautions in 2020 did not allow for this, and the project was shelved after 2021. Results were primarily based on participant feedback.

- It seems likely that 'birds' is too broad a category here, showing different feeding behaviours.
- Participants' methods / positions of strawberry growing were very different.
- Participants with strawberries grown **on the ground** reported blackbirds as the main strawberry thieves. For such birds already feeding / investigating at ground level, it may be worth checking any 'red things' encounter in their patch, regardless of if they were not food last time. Participants who grew **raised-up strawberries** and reported the main damage from small birds like sparrows had more positive views of the strawberry rocks (indeed, at least one community site continued this method for several years afterwards).
- Where squirrels were seen to be involved, paint likely did nothing vs. mammal scent of smell.
- Strawberry plants were unpredictable in their growth, with even bare root plants from the same batch producing very different numbers of fruit. It would be good to standardise the number of flowers allowed to go to fruit per plant (which may be undesirable for gardeners, given they are low yield, high value crops).
- Making the painted stones **was** a popular activity with participants.

Follow-on

The project did not produce enough data for us to make any strong conclusions about the effectiveness of the stones. However, it raised possible methodological adjustments that could be made to improve the idea. As of 2025, web searches still suggest 'making strawberry rocks' as a method to protect plants. It does not seem to have been tested out further.

A version of this project still seems suitable for garden citizen science, but may be outside the focus of the Buzz Club's current outlook.



Project Protocol



If you would like to try the Strawberry Rocks protocol, this is the final version used:

Equipment

- 🍓 At least one **strawberry plant** (in pots, grow bags, or in the soil).
- 🍓 **Strawberry-sized rocks**; at least **three** per plant.
- 🍓 **Acrylic paint** (either red or green).
- 🍓 Small paint **brushes**.

Instructions

Note: To do **both** the red and the green rocks, you need to have the treated plants be far enough away from each other that their effects don't overlap. We don't know how far this actually is, so we suggest having them 'a garden's distance apart' – as far apart as possible in the space you have, in similar conditions.

- 1) Paint your stones. As much like a strawberry as you like, as long as they are mostly red and / or green.
- 2) Place the painted stones on the soil around your strawberry plant(s), not hidden by leaves.
- 3) As the plants grow, move the stones to make sure they are not covered by the leaves.
- 4) Treat all plants the same in regard to feed / watering.
- 5) When your plants start to produce ripe fruit (red), record data once a week.

Count # of: **Ripe** fruit; **damaged** fruit; **unripe** fruit.

'Ripe fruit' and 'damaged fruit' should both be picked at the time of recording, to avoid double-counting.



Results:

Sum total of unripe fruit – sum total of ripe fruit = sum total of **lost** fruit.

Total lost / total unripe = % of fruit lost.

Compare this between plants surrounded by red rocks and green rocks.

Are they different?