



Hort  
Innovation

02

## Dried Grape Best Practice Guide

Spring to pre-harvest



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# Introduction

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**The awakening of vines after their winter dormancy marks the beginning of one of the most active phases in vineyard growth and fruit development. Consequently, this period is one of the busiest for growers and vineyard managers, and one of the most critical in terms of establishing and monitoring vineyard health and fruit development.**

Producing quality fresh grapes is the first step to producing quality dried fruit. Diligent management practices and good strategic decisions during the development of the canopy and fruit focus on three major development stages: budburst and leaf emergence, flowering and fruit set, and fruit development.

## Budburst & leaf emergence

In spring, the buds and protective scales along grapevine canes swell to reveal brown, woolly hairs (“woolly buds”). As the bud further swells, the tips of young green shoots emerge. In Sunraysia, this is usually around the second week of September. When 60 per cent of the nodes have progressed to this stage, it is known as budburst. Green shoots become clear and the leaves are completely free about two weeks after budburst (this is referred to as leaf emergence). Careful management is required throughout this spring and early summer period to ensure good shoot growth and cluster and berry development.

## Flowering & fruit set


The flowering and berry set phase establishes the maximum number of berries on each vine. The number of bunches along the canes was determined by conditions the previous November and by how many canes were retained on the vine during pruning. The number of bunches and berries per bunch are important components of yield at harvest. About eight weeks after budburst, the used petals covering the developing flowers separate, and “capfall” occurs, exposing the five pollen-bearing stamens and the pistil. Flowering occurs at the point of

the most rapid rate of shoot growth, usually about mid-November. The critical phase in determining the number of berries per bunch, namely fruit set, then follows. Shoots, leaves and flowers develop rapidly after budburst, more so as the weather warms.

## Fruit development

Managing vine health and fruit development to optimise productivity and fruit quality requires attention to many factors during the period from late winter to early summer. Achieving best results depends on optimising the water, nutrition and pest and disease management regime in any given season for the specific soil type, variety and rootstock. Managing all these inputs is challenging, but adherence to basic principles will contribute to achieving consistently higher yields, even when environmental conditions are not favourable.

It is important to be active in assessing the needs of the vine during spring – its most vigorous phase of growth and development. Growers should monitor shoots closely, taking into consideration previous cropping performance, cover cropping history, and the current and previous irrigation and fertiliser management regimes.



*This guide outlines the current recommended best practice in relation to key decision making in the period from budburst to veraison and the lead up to harvest.*

*Information in this guide is based largely on industry knowledge and experience, as well as a review of published research by former senior research scientist in horticulture at DEPI Mildura, Dr Karl Sommer. It has been compiled with the assistance of a grower-based advisory committee.*

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# Frost management

**Although the weather is warming up in early September, the risk of frost remains high, with the potential for significant damage to emerging and tender leaves and fruit buds.**

Remember to be a good neighbour. Your vineyard management practices in spring not only affect your property, but potentially also your neighbours', so do not undertake practices that will induce frost. Cold air (and thus frost), wherever it is induced, will move to the lowest spot. For example, premature working of the soil may cause pockets of cold air to form on your property, and these may flow on to your neighbours' land.

## BEST PRACTICE

**Compacted, moist soil best absorbs and holds heat from the sun. This is best done by cultivating the soil to have bare earth, compacting it with a roller, and then irrigating. However, if retaining the mulch or stubble from a cover crop, it should be slashed or mulched to near bare earth to maximise solar radiation absorption. Again, the soil should be kept moist. If a mulched vineyard floor is to be retained, have as wide a section of swept under-vine area as possible (it is a good compromise to totally cultivated soil to help with frost control).**



**For more information on frost management, visit [driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links](https://driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links)**



Above: Mulched vineyard floor



Above: Frost path through vineyard

# Canopy management

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**During spring and early summer there is still work to be done manipulating the canopy to achieve an efficient and effective harvest and to minimise the conditions for disease and pest outbreaks.**

## Shoot thinning

Shoot thinning involves removing the first two or three shoots from the base of each fruiting cane just after budburst is fully completed. There is an optimum window of about two weeks in mid-September – after all the buds have shot and before the canopy becomes too dense – to efficiently complete this task. There are thought to be three main benefits of this operation. Firstly, it simplifies the pruning process the following winter because there are no shoots growing from the shanks that remain on the cordon after harvest. Secondly, it removes some of the cordon fruit, and, finally, it creates a clearer space for cutting canes at the start of the harvest process.

## Carina berry set

Historically, poor berry set in Carina currants has been attributed to a shortage of carbohydrate supply to bunches during this phase. The practice of hand cincturing can overcome the problem but is not practical. The chemical chlormequat can “chemically cincture” the vines. However, the timing of its application is critical, with research showing effective treatment from seven days after bunch drop and at 70–100 per cent capfall.

Recent changes to the maximum chemical residue limits in some dried fruit markets have meant the use of chlormequat is becoming problematic. Farm trial work carried out during the 2019/20 harvest has indicated there is a chance chlormequat may not be required for setting currants in modern well-managed vineyard systems. It is currently only a single year of data, so more work is required to confirm the finding. These trials also confirmed that chlormequat used at rates specified on the label will meet Australian maximum residue limits.

Growers planning to use chlormequat need to check with their processor about market requirements.

## Sunmuscat shatter

Shatter of Sunmuscat berries, especially the second shatter after berry set, can at times be devastating and significantly reduce crop potential. Research has found excessive berry shatter in Sunmuscat is caused by a shortage of carbohydrate supply to bunches following fruit set. Where there has been a history of excessive second shatter, consider spraying with chlormequat to improve berry set and thus crop size. Once again, check with your processor about market requirements.

### BEST PRACTICE

**It is important to monitor budburst and note when buds burst at the end of fruiting canes. For Sunmuscat, the most success is achieved when chlormequat is applied from 36 days after budburst through to flowering.**

**Rate (applied to whole canopy):**

- 20ml of 77g/L chlormequat product/100L spray mix
- 100m non-ionic wetter/100L spray mix
- 1400L spray/ha

# Canopy management

## Cordon bunch removal

Removing unwanted cordon bunches, which are not attached to canes that will be cut for the drying and harvesting process, is an integral step in trellis drying. It reduces grape contamination as some harvesters remove both dried and undried fruit.

Cordon bunch removal is especially required for varieties with canes that are fruitful from the base bud to the end of the cane (Sunmuscat, Carina, and, to a lesser extent, Sunglo). However, cordon bunch removal is also recommended in the management of trellis-dried sultanas.

Not having to deal with cordon bunches at harvest allows growers to better concentrate on timely cutting and wetting.

Cordon bunches should be removed before they have grown too large and developed enough to survive contact with the chosen spray.

The cost of picking cordon bunches at harvest is estimated to be about equal to the value of the fruit, making this practice revenue neutral. However, cordon bunches draped over the wire dry more slowly, which will delay the harvest date and potentially expose the whole crop to rain.

## Calcium nitrate

Calcium nitrate, applied at a rate of 2.6 per cent (w/v), is effective in burning off unwanted cordon bunches. Target the area above the cutting zone, also spraying replacement canes where unwanted bunches are developing.

Spray when developing bunches are at pre-bloom – at the six to eight leaf stage when bunches are approximately 40–50mm in length (usually early to mid-October).

It is absolutely critical that the crop is protected from runoff and overspray and does not become wet below the cordon. Spraying with extra-large droplets to reduce spray drift will assist, as well as fitting a shroud to the sprayer (on the opposite side to the spray nozzles) to prevent drift to vines in the adjacent row.

Prevent runoff by constructing and fitting suitable protective equipment to an air-blast sprayer and fitting an “air knife” to blow any runoff away from the crop.

### BEST PRACTICE

If using calcium nitrate spray, the recommended rate is:

- 25kg technical grade calcium nitrate/1000L water, plus
- 1L/1000L non-ionic wetter (such as Agral)
- applied at a rate of 2500 L/ha (1000 L/acre).

Whenever a spray is applied, enter it into the Dried Fruits Australia spray diary.



Above: Chemical cordon bunch removal

# Canopy management

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## Ethrel

In Sunmuscat (and probably Sunglo), calcium nitrate can affect replacement canes and remove bunches. Growers have noted that replacement canes can be quite stunted when enough solution is applied to remove bunches. For this reason, ethrel has been trialled to remove cordon bunches using a hormonal action. Sunglo is also likely to produce secondary bunches after being sprayed with calcium nitrate, which is another reason to consider ethrel.

If using ethrel spray, the recommended rate is:

- 350ml Ethephon 720g/L Growth Regulator per 1000L, plus
- 1L/1000L non-ionic wetter (such as Agral)
- applied at a rate of 1100/Ha (450L/acre).

Apply at the end of flowering and early berry set (usually end-October or early November).

It is absolutely critical that the crop is protected from runoff and overspray and does not become wet below the cordon. Spray should be directed just above the cordon and any drift or dripping onto non-target areas of the vine must be avoided.

The effectiveness of ethrel can usually be seen after a week or two, with affected bunches losing all berries and, finally, the entire bunch structure falling off.

## Topping & skirting

Canopy size should also be reduced in early summer. Promote good air flow through the vineyard by topping vines growing down over the non-fruiting side and skirting just below the crop on the fruiting side of the trellis. This will assist with disease control if adverse weather conditions occur, improve access for wetting and harvest operations, and help with drying.



# Irrigation

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Even though vines are dormant in winter, it is important to maintain adequate soil moisture. If the winter has been dry, it may be necessary to irrigate during pruning. An irrigation before leaves begin to emerge is critical because it sets up the vines for strong budburst. But remember that vines use less water in spring than during the height of summer when they have a full canopy of leaves, so take care not to over-irrigate.

Monitoring with soil moisture capacitance probes gives the best indication of how irrigation applications are being used by vine roots. Combining this with visual inspection of vines or the use of NDVI imagery will clearly indicate if the vines' water needs are being properly met and aren't under water stress, or if water is being wasted and creating drainage past the rootzone.

## Pre-flowering

Over-irrigating can cause an excessive "grand flush" of cane and leaf development, especially in sultanas. The excessive flush of growth creates long internodes on replacement canes, which will eventually shade developing canes and result in less fruitful buds. Ultimately it reduces the crop and causes a downward spiral in production.

### BEST PRACTICE

Soil moisture should be monitored through visual inspection of the vineyard and with the use of monitoring equipment. Irrigations should be controlled to provide adequate, but not excessive, water until pre-flowering.

## Flowering & berry set

It is important to have plenty of soil moisture available during the period leading up to flowering and berry set to make the best of the potential crop size, especially in Sunmuscat and Carina varieties. If moisture stress occurs at this time, the results can be disastrous, with the vines aborting nearly all of the berries on bunches.

It is a fine balancing act to maintain enough moisture to not cause stress but also prevent the "grand flush" of overgrowth and problems it can cause. Avoiding stress during the bud initiation period is also important for the subsequent season's crop size potential.

## Heatwave conditions

Heatwave conditions at any point in this part of the season can cause significant damage to vines. For instance, two consecutive days of 45°C and 47°C in December 2019 caused significant heat

damage to vines. To mitigate these situations, the strategies to have in place are: good canopy coverage, wetting of the soil surface immediately prior to the heatwave, and the use of cooling sprays if available.

Try to keep vines in a stress-free condition, otherwise the leaves will "shut down" and stop producing sugar. Leaves will also slow down when the temperature reaches 36°C. As veraison approaches, berries begin to soften and may be more vulnerable to sunburn, particularly on rows with fruit on the north to north-westerly side of the trellis. Maintaining soil moisture levels will help maintain leaf function during hot conditions and reduce the likelihood of sunburn.

Soils irrigated the night before a hot day can reduce following daytime temperatures in the vineyard by up to 5°C. Using misters above the canopy during a hot day can reduce ambient temperature by 10–12°C.

Sunscreen products based on kaolin, such as Surround®, could be applied to vines to keep them cool and help protect them from sunburn prior to heatwave conditions.

# Irrigation

## BEST PRACTICE

Monitor weather forecasts around berry set, looking for heatwave conditions, and irrigate accordingly. If vines are dry and stressed during flowering and berry set, developing berries will drop off. This excessive berry shatter will result in far fewer berries left on bunches to develop into a crop.

From veraison (usually around the Christmas/new year period) through to cutting, carefully monitor weather forecasts for predictions of heatwaves. When hot weather is forecast, apply an irrigation if possible to ensure vines are well watered the night prior to a hot day, and make sure water is ordered to keep the soil topped up during the heat event.



For more information on irrigation, visit [driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links](http://driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links)



Above: Sunmuscat berry shatter



# Vine nutrition

There are no hard and fast recommendations for annual application rates of nutrients. However, nutrients are removed from the vineyard with every tonne of dried fruit produced. Some elements need to be replaced through the application of fertilisers, otherwise the vineyard is being “mined” of its nutritional elements.

The following table is a guide to the amount of nutrients removed from the vineyard with the crop.

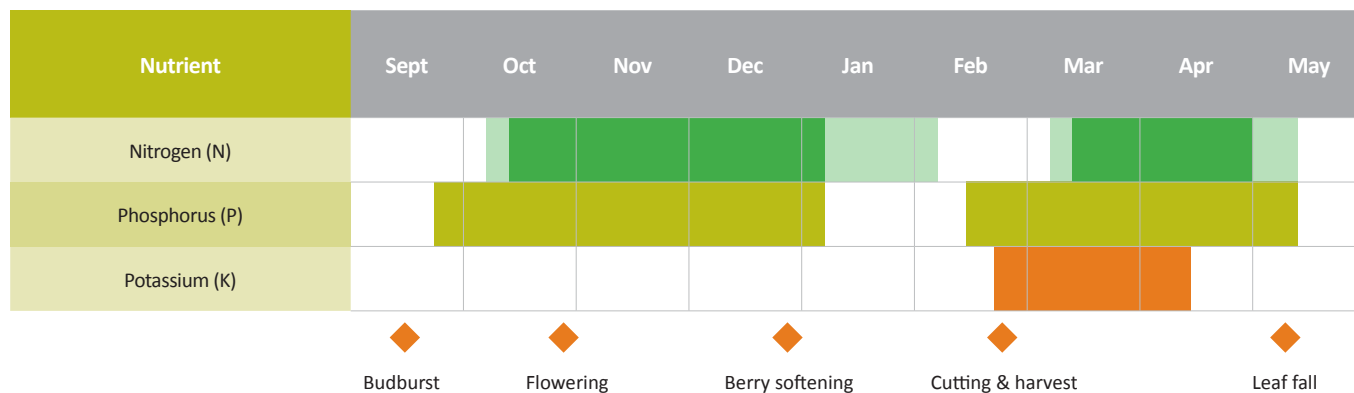
### BEST PRACTICE

Petiole sampling at flowering is the most objective method of assessing vine nutrient status. Petioles from opposite the basal bunches should be sampled at 50% capfall and analysed by an independent analytical laboratory. The concentrations can then be compared to the industry standards. Annual assessment using this method will allow growers to modify vineyard fertiliser programs to ensure vine nutrition is not a factor limiting yields and that fertiliser is not being wasted. Production records should also be maintained to assess fertiliser programs longer term.

Approximate amounts of nutrients removed in dried grapes at harvest			
Nutrient	Low (less than 5 tonnes/ha)	Average	High (greater than 10 tonnes/ha)
Nitrogen (N)	11kg	25kg	70kg
Phosphorus (P)	2kg	3kg	9kg
Potassium (K)	17kg	35kg	97kg
Calcium (Ca)	1	2	5
Magnesium (Mg)	1	2	4
Sulphur (S)	1	2	5

Depending on how much fruit is produced, the requirements just to replace nutrients removed from each hectare of vineyard are: up to 70kg of nitrogen (N), 10kg of phosphorous (P) and 100kg of potassium (K).

# Vine nutrition



# Pest & disease control

Producing clean and high-quality dried fruit depends heavily on the pest and disease control regime implemented in spring. Monitoring at least every two weeks for pests and diseases in the vineyard should begin at least four weeks before budburst. Growers should consult the Dried Fruits Australia spray diary or other industry guidelines for currently registered fungicides and pesticides. Whenever a spray application is applied, enter it into the DFA spray diary.

## BEST PRACTICE

Early spring is the time to plan out an adaptable disease and pest control strategy for the coming season. Consideration needs to be given to the rotation of chemical groups to avoid build-up of resistance. Forward planning will ensure optimum timing of control applications for a range of situations in the season ahead.

Remember that all chemicals used in the production of dried grapes must be recorded in a chemical spray diary.

Wks from budburst:	Vine growth stage:	Monitor for:
Minus 4	Late winter	Black spot; phomopsis
0	50% budburst	Record date
2	Shoots 10-15cm	Downy mildew (if weather data indicates a need); powdery mildew; black spot; phomopsis; light brown apple moth (LBAM) caterpillars; mites
4	Shoots 20-30cm	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; black spot; phomopsis; LBAM caterpillars; mites
6-7	Pre-flowering	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; black spot; phomopsis; LBAM caterpillars; mites
8	Early flowering (1-5% capfall)	Downy mildew; powdery mildew
9	Late flowering (80% capfall)	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; LBAM eggs and caterpillars
10	Berry set	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; black spot; phomopsis; mealybugs; LBAM caterpillars; bunch mites
12	Berries pea-size	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; LBAM eggs
13	Berries pea-size	LBAM eggs
15	Pre-bunch closure	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; LBAM eggs; mites
16-17	Berry softening	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; mealybugs; LBAM caterpillars; mites
20-22	2 weeks before harvest	Downy mildew; botrytis; LBAM caterpillars
22-24	Harvest	Botrytis (sample to check for chemical resistance); crop damage assessments for all diseases and pests
25-40	Post-harvest	Downy mildew; powdery mildew; mites

# Pest & disease control

## Pests

### Insects

Although many different insects and mites can be found in the vineyard, relatively few are serious pests in Australia. The main pests damaging grapes grown for drying are: light brown apple moth, long-tailed mealybug, grapevine scale, bunch mite and, in some cases, earwigs. Natural predators, including wasps, parasites, lacewings or ladybirds, as well as climate extremes, can assist in reducing numbers without the need for chemical control. Monitor insect activity in the vineyard and consider protection of vines at susceptible stages, such as flowering.

#### BEST PRACTICE

The best pest management programs combine cultural techniques and biological control agents as the primary method of control, with selected chemicals used only as necessary to prevent pest populations reaching damaging levels. Wettable sulphur is less toxic to pest predators than broad spectrum insecticides. Consult an experienced agronomist if you require advice about whether to implement chemical control programs.

## Snails

It is easiest to kill snails while they are still on the ground and feeding, so it's important to monitor the vineyard floor during early spring and bait where needed. This provides the best opportunity to stop snails moving up into the developing vine canopy and contaminating fruit at harvest.

As a rule of thumb, snails feed best in moist conditions between 10–20°C and are unlikely to feed at all when the temperature exceeds 30°C. Juvenile snails are the most prolific feeders, and this provides the best opportunity to deliver a lethal dose of chemical. Timing baiting programs with snail feeding activity is critical for effective control. Ideal conditions for annual active feeding are more likely in spring and autumn.

#### BEST PRACTICE

Rain-fast baits that do not disintegrate when wet will provide more timing flexibility as they can be put out before rain events. The best way to confirm the effectiveness of a baiting program is to check baits for signs of feeding, particularly in the morning.



Above: Brown lacewing  
Below: Ladybird



For more information on snail control, visit [driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links](http://driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links)

# Pest & disease control

## Diseases

The main diseases of dried grape varieties are downy mildew, powdery mildew, botrytis, black spot, bunch rots and phomopsis. Most spread rapidly in favourable conditions. Their ability to cause crop losses varies from season to season, depending on weather conditions and the stage of canopy development.

Vine cultural techniques that discourage disease should be adopted where possible. Open canopies, advanced irrigation systems and use of rain tolerant and disease resistant varieties will all contribute to producing high quality fruit. However, effective fungal disease management also depends on preventative sprays being applied on a routine basis and curative sprays being applied if needed.



Above: Powdery mildew flagshoot

## Powdery mildew

Powdery mildew is a widespread and persistent disease, with potential for high losses in vineyards where there was an infection the previous season. Powdery mildew overwinters in bark and buds and does not require moisture or rainfall for an infection to occur and spread.

Preventative fungicide sprays, using a chemical such as sulphur, should commence within two weeks of budburst and then occur routinely at 14-day intervals through to flowering.

### BEST PRACTICE

**The rule of thumb strategy for powdery mildew preventative spraying is 2-4-6 weekly intervals from budburst. Then, in the period to flowering, monitor for disease and spray only if evidence of disease is found.**

## Downy mildew

All dried grape varieties are susceptible to downy mildew, but it is a rain-triggered infection. It requires the occurrence of specific conditions, known as “10:10:24” – that is, at least 10mm of rainfall while the temperature is 10°C or more over a 24-hour period. Rain splash of spores must occur towards the end of the 24-hour period with foliage remaining wet for the rest of the time period.

Preventative sprays for downy mildew can be applied in conjunction with sulphur sprays (being used for control of powdery mildew). Downy mildew preventative chemicals, such as copper or mancozeb, can be tank mixed with wettable sulphur.

### BEST PRACTICE

**Spraying for downy mildew may not be necessary in fine (no rain) weather. If not applying downy mildew preventative sprays regularly, it is wise to have sufficient phosphorus acid fungicide to apply at short notice as a post-infection control method.**

# Pest & disease control

## Botrytis

Botrytis has become a problem for dried grape growers in recent years, especially with Sunmuscat. However, sultana is also susceptible before harvest if the conditions are right at flowering (to cause a latent infection) and if rain occurs before the fruit-bearing shoots are cut for trellis drying.

With limitations on chemical use after flowering, it is critical to commence a botrytis preventative management program at flowering (80 per cent or more capfall). Chemicals that sanitise the surface of susceptible fruit (hydrogen peroxide and peroxyacetic acid) may be of limited value to control botrytis loads in the vineyard after flowering. Consideration should be given to the use of biological fungicides for later-season botrytis prevention.



Above: Botrytis infection



For more information on botrytis and general disease management, visit [driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links](https://driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links)

### BEST PRACTICE

**It is important to remember that certain chemical groups should be used no more than two to three times in a season (depending on the chemical) in order to prevent the fungus building up resistance to the chemical.**

# Vineyard floor

**Managing the vineyard floor is predominantly about weed management. However, once the frost risk has passed, other considerations such as mitigating sunburn during heatwaves need to be taken into account.**

## Weed control

Weed seed is the most common contaminant of fruit. It incurs penalties at the packing shed and may result in rejection of fruit. Be vigilant with spiked-weed control throughout late winter and spring, particularly with the major problem weeds, three-corner jack, caltrop and gentle Annie. If there are only small “hotspots”, plants can be manually removed. However, chemical or mechanical control may be needed if the weed is more widespread.

Other weeds that should be looked for are khaki weed and Bathurst burr. Asparagus, when turned to seed, can also contaminate fruit and be difficult to remove, thus incurring a penalty.

To get the best out of herbicides, spray weeds when they are young and don't spray when they are stressed (frost, heat or water stress). Glyphosate works best in cooler temperatures and doesn't work well at high water application rates because of a lack of wetter and can be inhibited by poor water quality.

Herbicide resistance in weeds is a real problem in our region. A 2019 study of fleabane in Sunraysia found about 50 per cent of the samples collected were resistant to at least one herbicide. To avoid the development of herbicide resistant weeds, plan an annual program that uses herbicides with different modes of action.

### BEST PRACTICE

**Keep a keen lookout for germinating weeds after rainfall, and especially after thunderstorms. Caltrop will germinate readily with the onset of warmer weather and even more so as irrigations commence. Extra vigilance after rain for germinating caltrop is recommended because it will flower and start to produce seeds within 10 days of germinating. It will go on to produce hundreds of seeds if conditions are right. Control in the field is the preferred method of keeping seeds out of fruit and bins. It is far more costly to remove weed seeds present in harvested fruit.**

## Mulching

When the risk of frost has passed, there is advantage to be gained from mulching any remaining cover crops, natural vegetation or weeds. The mat of decomposing plant material helps keep the vineyard floor cool as the weather

warms up, thereby assisting with preventing sunburn of susceptible varieties.

### BEST PRACTICE

**Avoid cultivation from late spring as bare soil reflects heat and increases the chance of sunburn on developing grapes.**



**For more information on weed control, visit [driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links](https://driedfruitsaustralia.org.au/additional-resources-links)**



Above: Caltrop plant

# Harvest

## Early harvest preparation

Prepare equipment for harvest early. It's easy to get caught without the parts required to service machinery or with no equipment ready to go when fruit is ripe and it's time to summer prune. As fruit is maturing, and you have some feel for the size of your crop, communicate with your processor regarding estimated crop size. Some supply contracts may include tonnage clauses, so if you have a large crop, early communication with the processor may allow them to receive the whole crop without applying price penalties to your over-quota fruit.

### BEST PRACTICE

**Avoid frustration and disappointment during harvest by communicating regularly with processors and contractors. Advance notice will allow processors to allocate adequate bins for your harvest and prevent the frustration and disappointment of being short of bins. If you require harvest contractors, book in work dates early and, as harvest approaches, discuss any required changes. This will provide you with the best chance of getting contractors on site when needed.**

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