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Effect of Extended-Duration Row Covers on Muskmelons

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Effect of Extended-Duration Row Covers on Muskmelons

Abstract
Row covers have traditionally been used to increase crop earliness, leading to earlier harvest dates and higher market prices. However, row covers can also provide added benefits in protecting against damage by certain insects. Cucurbit crops, especially muskmelon and cucumber, attract cucumber beetles, which vector bacterial wilt, causing significant crop losses.

Keywords
Plant Pathology

Disciplines
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Effect of Extended-Duration Row Covers on Muskmelons

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Introduction
Row covers have traditionally been used to increase crop earliness, leading to earlier harvest dates and higher market prices. However, row covers can also provide added benefits in protecting against damage by certain insects. Cucurbit crops, especially muskmelon and cucumber, attract cucumber beetles, which vector bacterial wilt, causing significant crop losses.

Row covers are usually deployed from transplant until anthesis (start of flowering), then removed to allow insect pollination. By using hives of bees to supplement pollination, it may be possible to extend row cover duration by ~10 days beyond anthesis. Extending row cover protection may shield muskmelon crops from the first emergence of wilt-vectoring cucumber beetles, leading to a healthier crop and a greater yield.

Materials and Methods
Thirty-ft-long rows of Athena muskmelon seedlings were planted into black plastic mulch at the ISU Horticulture Station, Ames, IA. Single-row treatments using polymer row covers (Agribon AG-30) on wire hoops, with edges buried in soil, were compared in a randomized complete block, including four replications (rows) of four treatments, as follows:

1) Rows covers removed at anthesis.
2) Row covers removed 10 days after anthesis. At anthesis, both ends of row covers were opened to allow pollination.
3) Row covers removed 10 days after anthesis. At anthesis, a bumblebee hive was inserted under one end of the row cover, and the end was re-sealed.
4) No row covers.

Striped and spotted cucumber beetle numbers were monitored weekly from transplanting (June 7) through the end of harvest (August 27) using yellow sticky cards. Beginning 10 days after anthesis, the percentage of healthy, wilted, or dead plants in each row was assessed weekly. The number and weight of marketable and cull melons harvested from each row was also recorded.

Results and Discussion
The results reaffirmed the benefits of row covers. All treatments with row cover produced a greater yield of marketable fruits than the no-row-cover treatment (Figure 1), which experienced considerable damage from high winds early in the season. Row-covered treatments produced harvestable melons sooner than the non-covered plants.

Wilting was caused almost exclusively by bacterial wilt. Treatments 2 and 3 (row covers remained for 10 days after anthesis) had a greater percentage of healthy (non-wilted) plants at the end of the season (Table 1). When row covers were removed at anthesis (Treatment 1) however, bacterial wilt subsequently increased, and the percentage of healthy plants was not different than the non-covered control by the end of the season. Row cover benefits were in part related to weather protection, because high winds caused severe damage to plants in the no-row-cover treatment early in the season.
Acknowledgements
Thanks to Hank Taber, Nick Howell, Alex Carlson, Abby Gaul, Laura Logsdon, and Cheryl Tebben for bed preparation, crop planting, maintenance, and harvest.

Table 1. Mean percentage of healthy plants (no bacterial wilt symptoms).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>July 3</th>
<th>July 10</th>
<th>July 17</th>
<th>July 24</th>
<th>July 31</th>
<th>Aug. 7</th>
<th>Aug. 27</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. RC removed at anthesis onset</td>
<td>100 a*</td>
<td>98 a</td>
<td>82 b</td>
<td>62 b</td>
<td>50 b</td>
<td>42 b</td>
<td>8 b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. RC removed 10 d after anthesis onset</td>
<td>100 a</td>
<td>100 a</td>
<td>98 a</td>
<td>95 a</td>
<td>95 a</td>
<td>95 a</td>
<td>82 a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. RC removed 10 d after bees added</td>
<td>100 a</td>
<td>100 a</td>
<td>98 a</td>
<td>93 a</td>
<td>93 a</td>
<td>93 a</td>
<td>87 a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. No RC</td>
<td>68 b</td>
<td>48 b</td>
<td>33 c</td>
<td>28 c</td>
<td>25 b</td>
<td>25 b</td>
<td>15 b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Means in the same column that are followed by different letters differ (P < 0.05).

Figure 1. Cumulative weight (lb/subplot) of harvested fruit from each treatment.