

Coping with Crop Culprits

Gophers and Moles

Likely targets: Gophers eat the underground portions of garden crops.

Their mounds sometimes smother small plants, and their gnawing can girdle and kill young trees. Moles eat insects but no garden crops. While moles dig extensive tunnels that mar the looks of a manicured lawn or garden and can damage some plants, for the most part these animals are beneficial. Voracious insectivores, they eat their weight each day in cutworms, wireworms, sowbugs, grubs, centipedes, millipedes, and Japanese beetle larvae. (True, they do prey on earthworms, as well). Gophers also tunnel around just below the surface, but these larger creatures (a gopher may weigh 12 ounces, a mole just 3 ounces) readily consume crop roots. They also live more communally, with as many as 16 to 20 animals per acre.

Controls:

- Castor beans or mole plants (*Euphorbia lathyris*) can be planted around or in a garden. The bean seeds can also be dropped in tunnels.
 - Both plants are highly poisonous and should not be used in any gardens near small children.
- Spray a solution of one tablespoon of castor oil and one tablespoon of liquid detergent per gallon of warm water on soil and plants.
- Scatter human or dog hair about.
- Sprinkle chili powder and powdered garlic into tunnels weekly.
- Set baited live traps near gopher exits and in mole tunnels.
- Place rolled up pieces of Juicy Fruit gum in mole tunnels. (Wear gloves to mask your scent when you unwrap the gum). Moles love it, but it clogs their innards, fatally.

Rabbits

Likely targets: Carrots, strawberries, peas, beans, lettuce, tulip shoots, grasses, weeds, and the bark of fruit trees and raspberries. Rabbits are famed as garden raiders, but often don't live up to their reputation. Frequently they are present but cause little damage.

Controls:

- The long list of reputed rabbit repellents people sprinkle around a plot includes wood ashes, ground hot peppers, chili powder, garlic powder, crushed mint leaves, tobacco dust, tankage or blood meal, talcum powder and powdered rock phosphate. Most of these need to be replenished every so often or after rains.
- Snake effigies, commercial or homemade from old garden hose can be effective.
- Grow garlic, onions, or Mexican marigold (*Tagetes minuta*) in the garden.

- A well-mannered dog (one that doesn't itself damage the garden) can be a very effective deterrent.
- Share your harvest. Either plant extra for the rabbits, or sow extra crop seeds outside the main garden for the rabbits to enjoy.
- Use protective cages or covers for very susceptible crops.
- Wrap the bases of fruit trees with hardware cloth or other sturdy material to deter winter rabbit damage.
- Fence your garden. Wire fencing should be partially buried, extend at least two feet above ground and have holes smaller than 2 inches. An electric fence should have 2 strands, set 4 and 10 inches from the ground.
- Live traps. Trap them and release them somewhere else. Rabbits prefer covered to exposed traps. Apples and carrots make good bait.

Raccoons and Skunks

Likely targets: Everybody knows what raccoons like most - sweet corn! And they have an uncanny knack of waiting until the night it's perfectly ripe before they harvest it. They're also fond of melons and other fruits. A skunk's first love is insects - grasshoppers, beetles, crickets and grubs - so in general this animal should be left alone. But skunks often pull nocturnal corn raids too, enjoying the treat but letting the raccoons take the blame. Prevention measures are the same for both.

Controls:

- Catch the raider in a live trap. Sardines, marshmallows, and honey-soaked bread all make good bait. Start trapping a few days before the coveted crop is ripe. And if you catch a skunk, slowly walk up to the trap, cover it with a dark tarp, and then gently transport the well-armed mammal far away.
- Play a radio in the corn patch all night long. Talk stations work best.
- An outdoor light that either blinks on and off or rotates will scare coons and skunks away. (One that remains stationary or constantly on doesn't work).
- Several strands of low-strung electric fencing should work. Raccoons can climb over most non-charged barriers but some growers report success with chicken wire fences that are not supported along their top foot of length. The fencing apparently bends so far backward when the animal climbs it that the creature can't make it over.
- Surround the corn or melon patch with a three-foot-wide horizontal barrier that coons and skunks don't like to walk over - black plastic, newspaper, or mesh fencing.
- Wrap individual ears in foil, plastic, stockings, etc. This method, however, is quite time-consuming and may damage the crop in hot weather.
- Sprinkling baby powder on corn stalks and leaves when the ears ripen will deter the raiders. Reapply the powder after rains.

- Sprinkle ground red pepper or a mixture of powdered garlic and chili powder around vulnerable crops. Renew weekly or after rains.

Groundhogs

Likely targets: Carrots, peas, beans, sweet corn, alfalfa, grass, weeds, and more. The groundhog is a voracious vegetarian.

Controls:

- Catch them in live traps and transport them far away. Set traps near the burrows (under a brush pile, beneath a tree root, near a fence, or at some other concealed place) or along the main trails (look for lines of matted grass). Bait traps with apples, green beans, ripe bananas, or carrots. Catching the entire family will probably require resetting the traps a few times. Afterward, plug the burrows to discourage other groundhogs from moving in.
- Some people claim planting garlic or onions around a groundhog burrow will send them packing.
- Sprinkle ground red pepper around their holes and throughout your garden.
- Alter their habitat. Remove brush piles, tall weeds, and other shelter near your garden to deprive them of the cover they need.
- Fencing a groundhog out of your plot is difficult and not all that likely to succeed, since the animals are good at both climbing and burrowing. If you want to try, however, build a sturdy fence at least four feet high that extends at least one-foot underground.
- Plant alfalfa and clover away from your garden and hope they eat these favorites instead of your crops.

Cats and Dogs

Likely targets: Garden soil (and whatever grows there). Dogs can wreak havoc running over newly planted beds or digging up crops in search of something known only to themselves. And cats will wander at will through your plot, using it as one gigantic litter box. In general, experienced gardeners are less frustrated by wild animals than by pets allowed to run loose. Nobody complains when a woodchuck is trapped and transported elsewhere. But should that befall someone's dog, a major ruckus will soon follow. Somehow, it always seems to be the neighbor's pets, not your own, that do the damage. As a result, the problem becomes one of social relations.

Controls:

- Talk with your neighbors about the problem.
- Spray the perimeter of your plot with a hot pepper solution.
- Fence your plot with barbed, woven, or electric fencing. (Space the strands of electric fence 10 inches apart, with the bottom strand 6 inches off the ground, and run wire

loops into any dips the intruders might crawl through). Fencing will work against dogs, but not cats.

- Pound stakes in the ground where visiting dogs like to travel.
- Plant a catnip patch away from your main garden to lure felines.
- Make sure your compost piles are properly built so they don't have any exposed garbage, which will attract pets.
- Own a well-trained dog that chases off animal intruders.

Source: Mother Earth News