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Few things bother home gardeners more than to have ordinarily fun to watch wildlife animals devour their prized vegetables or landscape plants. While there is no sure stop to this kind of damage, there are a few things that home gardeners can do to help reduce the occurrences of wildlife damage.

Urban sprawl continues to bring people into direct contact with many types of wildlife. Consequently, many home gardeners find that the most serious pests they deal with are not insects but larger animals such as birds, rabbits, raccoons, and deer. Even pet dogs or cats can wreak havoc by trampling on or digging up plants.

When dealing with wildlife, keep the situation in its proper perspective. In most cases it is we home gardeners who have moved into the animal's territory. Be honest, how many of you have carefully placed your pea patch or garden plot right next to a wooded area that you know is inhabited by deer and rabbits and then expected them to politely stay out of our garden? They are adapting to the altered environment to meet their basic requirements for food, water, shelter, and space

Since different problems have different remedies, an accurate identification is important to successful pest control. Many of the larger mammals that visit the garden are nocturnal. Unless you are willing to stay up all night on guard, identification often must be based on the type of damage done.

Thoughtful pest management is the philosophy of today's knowledgeable gardeners. Determine a "threshold of acceptable damage." This makes economic and environmental sense.

Do a few missing blueberries warrant the time and expense required to cover your plants with netting? Do a few nibbled leaves from your garden plants justify erecting a fence around your entire garden? In many cases the answer is no. Planting "some for them and some for us" may be the best bet.

When and if damage becomes intolerable, consider the options available to you.

Exclusion—keeping the animal out.

Removal—trapping or other methods.

Repellents—both taste and smell repellents are available; check the label for crop restrictions.

Scare tactics—lights, sounds, foil, plastic owls and snakes are a few.

Habitat modifications—removing brush piles and keeping weeds mowed.

Only a few bird species are pests in the garden. If you notice seeds or newly sprouted seedlings disappearing or fruit with ragged holes pecked in it, birds may be the culprit. Exclude birds by covering newly planted seed with row covers. Established vegetables and fruit trees can be covered with netting. Reflective tape, fluttering objects, and other scare devices may help temporarily.

Succulent leaves, shoots and flowers are all delicacies to rabbits. If you have young plants that are being chewed to the ground, suspect rabbits. Rabbits also may chew the bark of fruit trees. Rabbit damage may be distinguished from deer damage by the teeth marks on the branch or twig. Rabbits have sharp upper and lower incisors that cut a smooth, 45 degree cut. Deer lack upper incisors and they leave a ragged edge on the branch. Excluding rabbits from the garden is the best way to deal with them. Erect a 3-foot-high fence of 3/4-inch mesh. Bury the fence 1 foot in the ground, leaving 2 feet above ground. Individual plants and trees can be protected with wire mesh cylinders. Repellents may provide some short-term control. Trapping is possible, but check with local wildlife authorities first.

Nothing is more frustrating than to have a dog run through your newly planted garden or to have a cat use it as a giant litter box. Here again, fences are a good idea. If your dog is the culprit, training is the key. Odor repellents may help temporarily.

Raccoons can cause considerable damage to vegetable gardens. Raccoons bend corn stalks down to eat the ears, and they break open and scoop out watermelons. Control measures include keeping pet food put away inside a tightly closed metal container, securing garbage can lids, and erecting a 5-to 6-foot fence or a two-wire electric fence. Repellents may help temporarily. Live trapping in a wire cage trap is usually an easy task. Consult your game and fish officials before attempting to trap them. If trapping raccoons, use caution as they are extremely aggressive when cornered and can carry a number of diseases including rabies.

Deer enjoy almost everything from the garden and orchard. If you find leaves, shoots, and stems chewed—along with obvious deer tracks—you've got a deer problem. To keep them out of your garden, erect a tall, wire mesh fence (up to 8 feet) or a three- to five-wire electric fence. Fencing is about as an effective method as there is for controlling deer damage to home gardens and crops but it is not without its drawbacks. Cost

is certainly a factor in deciding whether or not to fence in your garden. As the old saying goes you may win the battle but lose the war if you spend more money to protect your plants than the amount of vegetables that they grow are worth.

Another option is high tensile electric fencing. The new polytape (nylon mesh with stainless steel woven into the mesh) is an option that is fairly affordable, more portable, and easier to install. Many cattle producers use the same polytape to create portable grazing paddocks only they are keeping cattle in not critters out. The most important things to remember is that the fencing should be placed up before the damage starts and you must keep the fence “hot” at all times.

Deer are wary of unfamiliar smells, so commercial repellents may help temporarily. Deodorant soap bars have also repelled deer short term. Alternate these materials to prevent the odors from becoming too familiar to the deer. Homemade techniques such as the use of soap and human hair as odor repellants tend to work but only for very short periods of time and must be changed frequently. Place the objects at three feet intervals.

Rearranging the plants can also decrease problems with deer. Deer are actually picky browsers and they have a preference for eating certain types of plants over others. Place plants with a lower preference where the most damage occurs or in places where there is little or no human contact. You can also increase the distances between your garden edges and natural deer cover such as woods or thickets. We all know that deer love clover, so you may consider planting a clover patch in an area that will lead the deer away from your prized plants.

There are many over the counter spray repellants to help prevent wildlife damage in both the home garden and in the landscape. These repellants have been used with very mixed success. Keep in mind that any of these products work as contact materials. That is to say that as new growth develops on the plant, the material must be resprayed in order to protect the plant. They can also be relatively expensive. It is best to try whichever product you select on a small number of plants or else only on your more prized plants and evaluate for yourself the effectiveness of the product.

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