

Control of Mammals and Birds in the Vegetable Garden

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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 you who has moved into the animal's territory. They are adapting to the altered environment to meet their basic requirements for food, water, shelter, and space.

Identify the Pest

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.

Decide When To Act

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 lettuce 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.

Taking Action

Birds 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.

Rabbits 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.

Dogs and cats 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 These masked night marauders 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 county Extension agent for sources. If trapping raccoons, use caution.

Deer 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. Ask your county Extension office for fence details. 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.