

## Halt, Thief!

**Don't let wildlife turn your garden plot into their food plot. Learn about common garden invaders and how to stop these garden critters in their tracks.**

By John J. Morgan

Rascally racoons, deer, squirrels and more can wreck havoc in your garden. Learn some ways to stop these garden critters. Year after year, we toil—soil tests, fertilizing, tilling, planting and nurturing—all with the hope of growing that perfect garden. Blood, sweat and tears go into our annual crop.

I'm fine with the blood and sweat, but it's the tears I try to avoid. Tears can be an immediate by-product of bad weather, insect invasions or garden goblins.

I'm talking about goblins of the feathered and furry variety, of course.

These sinister villains take our labors and turn them into stubble. If we'd just spend some time on crop security, we can minimize or even eliminate the tears brought on by wildlife from the fields and forests.

Before investing any time or energy in your dream garden, inventory your potential for wildlife damage to your crops.

If your farm is heavily forested and your garden is in a relatively small area (1 to 20 acres), then you're probably planting a wildlife food plot!

However, if your garden is located among vast areas of pastures, hayfields or homes, then your circumstance may not be quite as dire. In either situation, critters can still travel a distance to dramatically affect your crop, so don't be fooled by perceived isolation from animals.

Critter culprits hail from all nooks and crannies. Forests, of course, hold large volumes of garden invaders: deer, skunks, raccoons, opossums, bears and even wild hogs.

After the sun sets, many of those thought to be woods-dwellers venture out. Rabbits, voles, crows and groundhogs, on the other hand, can pester gardens everywhere, day or night. The moral of the story is that few, if any, gardens are immune from infiltration.

### Top Garden Foes

If you've spent any time outdoors, you're already familiar with these common critter culprits. It's not always easy to catch them in the act, however, so if you already have unwanted visitors to your garden, it's helpful to know how to identify who's doing the damage.

Once you know your offenders, you can put a plan in place to prevent them from visiting again. (What can fencing do for you? Get some garden fencing tips>> )

Bill Rees has spent nearly half a century gardening on his northern Pennsylvania farm. Over the years, he's encountered just about every type of critter invasion.

He's had bears, voles, raccoons and opossums, but without hesitation, he labeled the No. 1 goblin as the white-tailed deer.

"Year in and year out, you could count on deer being in the garden," he says.

There is no more abundant large mammal in the United States than the white-tailed deer, and they'll dine on just about any garden plant.

Their damage is easily identified; because they lack upper incisors, the result is a jagged, irregular cut in vegetation.

They're fairly easy to catch red-handed at dawn and dusk, too.

Another usual suspect is the raccoon.

Its ingenious nature and ability to climb make it a common a garden foe. They have a knack for stripping ears of corn, and often, they just consume a portion of the ear. When tackling melons, the furbearer will dig a hole in the side and pull out the goodies with its forepaws.

The coon can devastate a tomato patch, too. Be on the lookout for its obvious paw prints in the soil.

When your tender peas look like they've been cut with scissors, look to our small, furry friends. These are typical signs of a rodent or rabbit infestation.

The most feared public enemy here is the cottontail rabbit.

These abundant small mammals avoid corn, tomatoes, potatoes, squash, cucumbers and a handful of peppers, but they'll eat nearly everything else. For those gardeners who keep flower gardens and fruit trees, the rascally rabbit can cause serious problems.

There's also a rising star of a villainous nature that can devastate a garden in a single night: wild hogs.

Gardeners in the Deep South have dealt with them for years, but these rooters are becoming prevalent in more northern climates.

Wild hogs generally travel in groups, so they can destroy large areas quickly. In moist soils, their rooting is often aimed at invertebrates or underground vegetation. Of course, they also enjoy above-ground vegetables that you've labored to grow. Keep your eyes and ears open for free-ranging hogs in your area. Should they find your garden, devastation is sure to follow.

The final menace that many a farmer has battled is the American crow. This primary aerial garden menace can damage corn, melons, sunflowers and fruit crops. Historically, crows were a much greater problem, but they can still cause localized issues.

#### Five Tactics to Keep Them Out

Flying vermin and land-based goblins alike are no fun in the garden.

Consider these five tactics to keep them out:

##### 1. Location, location, location

It might sound like a simple concept, but locate your garden far away from wildlife habitat. First and foremost, make your garden a place critters don't want to be—despite it being a buffet.

"Animals need to be uncomfortable around the garden," says Rees.

Keep it as far away from woods, unmowed areas, and brush and rock piles as possible. Force animals to be alienated from their escape cover. Increased visibility makes them more vulnerable to predators and other enemies, so they'll be less likely to venture out.

##### 2. Use creative deterrents

Visual, auditory and olfactory deterrents come in the form of commercial devices and downright-creative, homemade remedies.

Garden centers offer sentinel owls and plastic snakes, but I enjoy the more imaginative inventions like a scarecrow crafted from sections of hose. Some gardeners use plastic bags, strips of aluminum, pie plates or aluminum cans to make noise that bothers the critters. Commercial noise makers may also help with severe bird invasions.

A host of chemical deterrents are available, as well, but these aren't appropriate for use around crops grown for human consumption. These direct-application chemicals aren't good options for vegetable gardens, yet some chemicals can be applied on surrounding vegetation to act as a barrier.

Plot Saver, for example, uses a chemical applied to a ribbon posted around the perimeter of the garden to exclude deer.

A home remedy that Rees recommends is cheap men's cologne sprayed on vegetation surrounding the garden.

Another trick used by a friend is to spray bleach on the surrounding vegetation. Both techniques require reapplication, particularly after a good rain. [More tips>>](#)

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About the Author: John graduated from Penn State (BS) and the University of Georgia (MS) with degrees in wildlife management, and he is a Certified Wildlife Biologist. He owns and manages a 15-acre hobby farm in Kentucky.