



Keep Your Garden Protected

Protect your garden using planting strategies, fences and even owls--help keep deer and other critters away.

By Rhoda Peacher

About the Author

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Your city-dwelling friends look with envy at you and your farm. "You have so much space," they say. "There are so many birds here. And you get to see wild animals right outside your door!"

© Rhoda Peacher "Yes," you think to yourself, "I have deer and rabbits eating just about every desirable plant in my garden, and gophers working from underneath to undermine anything left behind."

You don't have to pay the "critter tax" in order to live on your farm and have a garden too. A few preventative measures on your part will keep furry marauders from reaping the benefits of your hard work.

Ideally you should be able to enjoy having nature on your doorstep without having a little voice in the back of your mind wondering: How many tomato plants have deer eaten today? Which row of carrots are gophers going to attack next? How many rabbits can one garden support?

Build Fences and Raise Beds

If you understand how the freeloaders work, you can plan strategies to keep them from feasting on the fruits of your labor. For example, deer are browsers and will sample almost anything growing in your garden. They will do more than sample the items they find most tasty and can devastate your flower bed or vegetable patch in just a few days. The most effective way to keep deer out of your garden is to put a tall wire mesh fence around it. Deer are excellent jumpers, so the fence should be at least 8 feet high and it should be secured to the ground at the bottom so deer can't push underneath.

Fencing, Fertilizer and Nest Boxes

More information about wireless deer fencing:
<http://www.wirelessdeerfence.com>

More information about fermented salmon fertilizer:
<http://www.coastofmaine.com/fertilizers-salmon.shtml>

More information about barn owls and building or buying nest boxes:



<http://www.owlpages.com/links.php>

Rabbits like to nibble on most of the items you find either tasty or most ornamental. To discourage rabbits, you can put a low fence around your garden. Use wire mesh fencing no larger than one inch because rabbits can squeeze through small openings. The fence should be at least 18 inches high. If you live in jack rabbit country, the fence should be 24 inches high. Bury the bottom of the fence at least four inches underground and bend the buried fence outward to discourage rabbits from digging underneath the fence. If you already have deer fencing installed, attach fine mesh fencing to the lower part of your fence to keep out rabbits.

Gophers dig tunnels underground and only rarely travel on the surface. They eat your root vegetables from the bottom. Air spaces created by gopher tunnels can be detrimental to plants' root systems.

Building raised beds for your vegetable garden is a good way to protect your plants from both gophers and rabbits. The sides of the beds should be at least 18 inches high to discourage rabbits from jumping into them. Before filling the beds with dirt, securely attach fine-meshed hardware cloth across the bottom. Gophers and other burrowing animals will be blocked from undermining your vegetables.

You can keep deer from eating plants in raised beds by sinking a post at each corner of the raised bed and attaching a length of four-foot-high fencing to each post. Run the fence the length of the bed to the next post.

Attract Owls to Help Patrol Pests

To best attract owls, make sure your owl nesting boxes are weatherproof and well ventilated. Great Horned owls are the main predator of barn owls, so the opening of a nest box should be no larger than five and a half inches. The nesting area should be no smaller than 12" x 12" with a depth of 16".

A roomier nesting area may encourage the female to lay more eggs. If you extend the box with a second room that has perches for adult owls, you will make your nest boxes more attractive to owls. To keep droppings from building up inside the box, don't put a bottom on the perching part of the box.

Barn owls start scouting for nesting areas as early as December and may begin raising their first set of chicks by February. You should clean the boxes in the late fall after the second set of fledglings have left the nest. A hinged opening on the side will provide easy access for cleaning. When cleaning the nest box wear rubber gloves and a dust mask, and seal the nesting materials in a plastic bag. You may find uneaten mice in the nest box, and owl pellets contain undigested bits of prey. Rodents (especially deer mice) are carriers of hantavirus, which is harmful to humans. Spray the interior of the box with a 2 percent solution of household bleach and put a new layer of wood shavings or chips in the nest area of the box.

It is important to inspect your boxes once a year to make sure that honey bees or wasps have not moved in.

Leave one side loose so you can have easy access to the veggies. You can use wire bent into hooks to keep the fence closed. Your vegetables will be safe from all manner of furry raiders.

Rabbits often chew on the soft bark of trees, causing serious damage. Cylinders made of hardware cloth placed around the trunk of the tree will prevent rabbit damage. (If you live in beaver country, this method will keep them from cutting down your trees.) Make the cylinder large enough to go around the trunk with two inches of clearance. Depending on the size of the tree, you should use two to four stakes the same height as the cylinder and drive them firmly in the ground. This will prevent animals from leaning the hardware cloth against the tree and eating through it. Be sure that the cylinder is at least eighteen to twenty inches higher than your normal maximum snow height.

A Prickly Plant Can Stand Guard

Physical barriers are the most foolproof method for protecting your garden, but they're not always a viable option. Fences can be unsightly, especially in the more visible areas of your garden such as your perennial beds. So, you may consider other, more discrete options to protect plants from marauders. One of the most low maintenance ways to keep deer and rabbits from eating your perennial garden is to choose plants they don't like.

Daisies, papaver (poppies), narcissus, rudbeckia, achillea, agastache, aster, lupine, coreopsis, verbascum, centaurea and echinacea are available in many varieties and are not particularly palatable to deer or rabbits.



Plants with tough or prickly foliage such as echinops, eryngium, cardoon, euphorbia, berkheya, and sedum tend to be avoided by furry nibblers. Rabbits and deer don't seem to be partial to herbs, so your mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, bay laurel, tarragon, thyme, fennel and lavender will likely survive. However, deer have been known to eat basil to the ground. Digitalis and belladonna both have attractive flowers and are unlikely to get munched, but make sure you can safely keep these plants away from pets and children. Deer will eat almost anything if they are hungry enough, so in a lean year or in winter, you should expect some damage even to so-called "deer resistant" plants.

Build a Hawk Perch

For daytime rodent control, encourage hawks to hunt on your property.

Erecting several 20' to 25' tall perches around the area will encourage hawks to linger and hunt. If you don't want to limit your gardening to plants that rabbits find least desirable, you can make the areas outside your garden a less friendly place for rabbits to live. Rabbits are uncomfortable crossing large expanses of open area.

Brush and tall grasses or anything that gives rabbits a place to hide and rest should be removed from areas around your garden. You can try to lure rabbits away from your garden by planting grasses and clovers (that rabbits prefer to eat) in an area far away from your garden. Rabbits like weeds in the plantain family, so allow some weeds to grow and rabbits may eat weeds instead of your garden. However, be careful that you don't end up attracting even more rabbits to your property than you already have.

Traps, Safe Sprays and Owls

Live traps are another way to control your rabbit population. Bait the traps with leaves of plants that rabbits have been nibbling. Be sure to check the traps two or three times a day. You can release the rabbits several miles from your property so they will be unlikely to return. Check with your local extension office for any regulations regarding suitable release sites.

Spraying your plants with repellants will discourage animals from eating them. Commercial sprays such as Deer Out and Deer Scram are available at nurseries and on-line. They can be applied to the foliage of plants that you don't expect to eat. These sprays need to be reapplied every week or so to be most effective, and always after rain.

Because of its strong unpleasant smell, you can use fermented salmon fertilizer as deer and rabbit repellant. Spray a dilute solution on your plants, and the odor will discourage deer and rabbits from eating the foliage. Natural oils in the fertilizer will help keep it from washing off quickly in rain, so it doesn't need to be applied as often as some other sprays. Salmon fertilizer is a natural product and can be applied to vegetables as well as to your ornamental plants. It will also discourage aphids and help prevent fungal diseases such as powdery mildew and black spot. If you apply it in the evening, the smell will have time to dissipate overnight. In the morning you should be able to enjoy your garden, but the deer and rabbits won't. However, you may not want to use it too close to harvest time! Consider carefully whether you should try the salmon option if you live in bear country.

Another alternative to traditional deer fencing is the new wireless "fence." It consists of individual posts that have a deer attractant on them. Deer investigate the scent and receive a mild electric shock that trains them to stay away from the area. It takes some time for deer to find the posts and learn to avoid your garden, so you may still get some plant damage when you first install the posts. You can experiment with placement for optimal results.

Encouraging barn owls to live on your property is a natural way to control gophers. Owls are night hunters, so they're out when gophers are most likely to venture above ground. One adult barn owl can eat a gopher a day. Baby barn owls can eat three or four gophers a day, and barn owls often raise two sets of chicks each year. If you provide nest boxes for barn owls, you'll encourage them to stay nearby. Place a nest box on a pole in a shaded area at least twelve feet high, or build one inside your barn with an opening to the outside. Barn owls are not territorial, so you can put up as many nest boxes as your rodent population will support. Place several boxes one hundred yards apart from each other so the hunting territories of the nesting pairs will overlap. Owls don't like to hunt directly around their nesting area, so place the boxes one half mile or more away from the area where you would like for them to hunt. Owl droppings are corrosive to metal, so don't place the boxes where droppings can fall on vehicles or farm machinery. Install the boxes away from human activity. Owls will tolerate a small amount of disruption, but you don't want to risk driving them away. Using nature to control rodent pests will cut down on the use of farm chemicals and possibly save you money in the long run.

If you have dogs, they can be great help to you in keeping deer, rabbits, and gophers at bay. Large dogs can discourage



deer from coming onto your property altogether, and smaller dogs can be great for gopher control. However, you should be careful about leaving your small dogs unattended if coyotes are in your area. Dachshunds, for example, are patient and will sit at gopher holes for hours. The dogs can be so intently focused on animals underground that they forget to be observant of their surroundings and can fall prey to coyotes.

Another way to discourage gophers from digging under your garden is to smoke them out. Place a small bit of sulfur at the edge of a gopher hole. Using a propane torch burn the sulfur until it starts smoking well. Cover the hole, forcing smoke down through the tunnels.

If you found a well-connected set of tunnels, you'll start to see smoke coming up out of the ground from all of the other holes in the gophers' tunnel network.

A little time and effort put into garden defenses will allow you to relax and enjoy living with your four-legged neighbors. Next time your friends visit and sigh enviously, you'll be able to agree with them. Yes, it is possible to have your garden and eat it too.

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