

Tips for keeping critters out of gardens

By Wendy Hanson Mazet

The winter of 2012 went down in the record books for being dry, unseasonably warm and short. But what does last winter have to do with this year's vegetable and flower gardens? Well, the very mild winter is the reason many gardeners are being inundated by unwanted critters this summer.

By the time gardeners got a jump-start on their gardens, ground squirrels and voles already were enjoying the mild temperatures and mating. Wildlife numbers are up this year with less die-off over the winter months. Our offices have been flooded with calls about cottontail rabbits, ground squirrels, voles and many other pests.

When deciding which mode of protection or control you are going to use, first you must determine what's causing the problem. Gardeners living in town are most likely to have problems with quail, rats, raccoons, ground squirrels, moles and voles. People living on larger parcels near open space or sources of water have many other pests to add to the list, including cottontails and jackrabbits, chipmunks, skunks, deer, bears and others. Each critter is unique in its habits and the type of damage it can cause.

Once you have identified your pests, it is time to build a strategic plan to manage their impacts. There are seven main options for homeowners to explore: Use repellents, barriers, traps, baits, encourage natural predators, modify the habitat or simply choose to live with the damage.

Liquid repellents may work for short periods, but can become time-consuming and costly. Habitat modification and exclusion are the most effective defenses. A fence reinforced with

chicken wire or hardware cloth deters many rodents, particularly when the wire is buried 12 inches in the ground and rise 2 feet above. Small, portable chicken-wire cages help protect seeds, new seedlings and small plants from feathered pests. Once crops grow 6 to 12 inches tall, birds tend to leave them alone and the cages can be moved to protect other crops.

Trapping and baiting work very well once you have properly identified the pest. There are several different types of kill traps and various styles of live traps. Remember, when choosing a live trap, you then must kill the animal humanely. Relocation of most wildlife is illegal and inhumane, as most live in colonies and territories. There are several baits on the market. Read the labels carefully as products are limited to specific pests and uses (indoor or outdoor).

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