

(Earth Talk) Non-toxic, non-lethal ways to deal with squirrels, gophers and groundhogs

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Tuesday, 20 October 2009 15:33



Dear EarthTalk: What would you recommend as a non-toxic/non-lethal way to keep squirrels, gophers and groundhogs away? -- Faye Gillette, Coarsegold, CA

Keeping unwanted critters away can be tricky business, and options are somewhat limited.

For starters, make sure exterior garbage, recycling and compost containers are shut tight, and pick up and remove any fallen fruit that your apple, pear or plum trees may have discarded. Of course, these measures will go only so far in deterring unwelcome critters, so you may need to employ a repellent or more proactive strategy.

One favorite repellent sold at plant nurseries is Bonide's Organic Repels-All, a concoction of dried blood, putrescent whole egg solids and garlic oil. The stuff, which can be sprayed on plants, grass, walkways and buildings without causing damage, smells terrible, and thus provides a natural barrier to unwanted animal visitation. Another top choice is Shake-Away Organic Animal Repellent, which comes in various natural formulas targeted to whichever type of critter you're trying to deter. The active ingredient in the product is the urine of a feared predator; Shake-Away's Small Animal Repellent, for example, uses fox urine. These solutions can last for weeks in dry climates, but will need to be re-applied regularly following precipitation.

If Repels-All or Shake-Away don't do the trick, flowers might. According to gardening expert Bonnie Manion, narcissus bulbs naturally deter gophers. "Any type of narcissus bulb, which includes jonquils, paperwhites and daffodils, will be a deterrent to gophers, rabbits and deer in your garden and property," she writes on her VintageGardenGal blog. "Bulbs planted in the ground send out a year round message to critters by actually 'advertising' a toxicity odor or fragrance."

Of course, these deterrents may or may not work in your situation. If squirrels are damaging your trees, you could install aluminum collars around the bases of the trunks to prevent them

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from climbing; adjacent trees need to be wrapped, too, since jumping from tree to tree is a squirrel's stock and trade. If squirrels are hogging the bird feeder, there are a number of feeder styles that will deter them, including some with a perch that starts to spin whenever a creature heavier than a bird steps on it, tossing the invader gently off.

Gophers and groundhogs present a unique problem, as they burrow tunnels in the ground and eat seeds, roots and often your entire garden bounty. And they are particularly difficult to chase away; the common—and often cruel—method of flooding their tunnels will only temporarily deter them. Another approach comes from the old wives' tale category, but just may work: stuffing dog hair into the holes at the end of their tunnels. Brush some hair off your own pooch or get it from a local dog groomer.

According to vegetablegardener.com, fencing your garden in is probably the best, though not fool-proof, way to keep the groundhogs out. "The fencing should be at least 3 feet tall and made of tight wire mesh [and] buried in the ground a minimum of 1 foot," the site recommends. Angling out a section of the underground part of the fence to create an L-shape will deter the animals from digging under it, and curving the top of the fence outward will deter climbing.

CONTACTS: Bonide, www.bonideproducts.com; Shake-Away, www.shake-away.com; Vegetable Gardener, www.thevegetablegardener.com; VintageGardenGal Blog, www.vintagegardengal.com.

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