

Rabbits and Other Nasties

Published 6/12/20 – Image titled “dancing bunny illustration from public domain childrens book” from freevintageillustrations.com

Very few things give a gardener worse feelings than to see pests destroying their plants. I can vividly remember a moment 50+ years ago when my ultra pacifist mother who's worst insult about someone was to refer to them as a “boob,” removed a gopher from the land of the living by a couple of well placed blows with her weapon of choice, the garden hoe. I recall there was screaming, but that very well could have been coming from me. My dad, who also witnessed this massacre, culminated the process by exclaiming “My goodness” as the dust settled around the battle field. I learned several pieces of vital information that day: never underestimate the anger a gardener has against pests, mom was a lot tougher than she looked, and don't dig in the garden unless given permission.



Weeds were the topic last week, pest this week. What can you do if suffering from uninvited garden visitors? Nothing is perfect, but preventative measures usually have the best effect. If the pests can't get to your garden, they can't eat anything. Fences, netting, etc. are all designed to physically prevent the pest from gaining access to your prized fruits and veggies. Some repellents are also effective; these use a smell that the pests don't like. But for both physical barriers and repellents, both need regular examination to make sure breaks in the barriers haven't formed or the repellent has faded away.

Other great preventatives are domesticated and wild animals. A good dog (one that doesn't dig in the garden!!) or cats can be great at keeping deer, rabbits, squirrels, and other animals from your garden. Owls are great night time protectors. Several years ago we had 4 or 5 elms with craggy limbs surrounding our backyard. No rabbits. The elms were eventually removed or trimmed, which removed all of the owl perches. Result was no owls and the rabbit population exploded. Now there are a lot of neighborhood cats patrolling both day and night and the rabbit population is pretty much down to zero again.

Insect pests are harder to prevent, but can usually be brought under control if correctly identified early in the infestation process. Notice I said “correctly identified.” Just within the last 10 days leaf samples have been brought in with damage that was thought to be fungal but was actually caused by insects. Also in reverse, leaves with supposed insect damage but instead turned out to be fungus caused.

There are some husbandry tasks that can reduce most small pest outbreaks, but often chemical help in the form of insecticide, miticide, or fungicide are needed. To use the right chemical requires knowing the right target. Your neighbor or co worker may be, or may not be, right. Ag Extension Services is who we ask when presented with plant damage we can't identify. A good start for anyone is a trusted garden center, but please put the samples in a zip lock just in case the pest is transmittable.

And watch out for angry moms with access to gardening implements. Especially if you happen to be a gopher or rabbit.

Art Smith is a co-owner of East Pierre Landscape and Garden Center, 5400 SD Hwy 34, Pierre