

Saco Community Garden: Pests in the Garden

by Peg Mills

The most important rule: don't panic. The second most important rule: share what you know so that others can help solve the problem.

Animals

Some are easy: **dogs** are not allowed in the garden. Most **birds** are garden helpers because they eat the bugs that we don't want on our plants. We did once have the neighbor's chickens in the garden, but that happened before we put up the fence. **Chipmunks** and **squirrels** like to eat fruit such as tomatoes and strawberries. You can put row covers on your plants to protect your fruit from these rodents. **Cats** are a problem because they love to dig in the soil, and well, soil it. If you see cats or signs of cats in the garden, report them right away. We have had signs of **woodchucks** (groundhogs, if you prefer) from time to time. We had a woodchuck under the shed, and so that year we put out a lot of toy windmills to deter them, because woodchucks don't like motion and vibration. If you see signs of woodchucks, please report them via the SCG email.

Insects

Most of the insects that visit or live in the SCG are beneficial. Unfortunately, there are exceptions. **Flea beetles, cutworms, cucumber beetles, Mexican bean beetles, Japanese beetles (how do these guys get nationalities?), and tomato hornworms** all have been reported in the garden. Because we follow organic practices in the SCG, we don't use any poisons to combat these creatures, but we do have resources:

1. General good habits: Plant in healthy soil, give your plants room to grow with good air circulation, and water your plants at the root zone, not overhead. Clear away debris in your garden where bugs can hide. Examine your plants frequently for weakness or problems, looking on the top of leaves, on the underside of leaves and along the stem. Plant alyssum, parsley, carrots or dill in your garden to attract beneficial insects that attack the pest insects. Also, if you use the same plot every year, consider planting different crops each year so that an insect that overwinters will not have the same menu every year.
2. If you find a bug on your plants, first identify it. It might be a good bug! We have a chart and a book on garden pests in the shed. If it is a bad bug, remove it and its eggs by hand and discard it in the garbage that you take out of the SCG. If it is a tiny pest, you may need to remove the whole leaf or even the entire plant. Do not compost! Also, if you find a destructive insect in your garden, please report it to the SCG email so that other gardeners can be on the lookout. The more gardeners who are aware of and combat a pest, the more likely you will win the pest war in your own plot.
3. Some specifics: use a collar of cardboard half-buried around tender plant stems to protect plants from **cutworms**. A half toilet paper core is ideal. Early in the morning, while they are still slow moving, knock **Japanese beetles** into a pan of soapy water, or pick them off by hand and drown them in soapy water anytime. Pick **tomato hornworms** off by hand and stomp on them or drown them in soap water, except, hornworms that are covered with white wiggly things are

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carrying parasitic wasps (that's good). If a hornworm has these parasites, discard the worm in the bushes behind the garden so the parasites might live.

Plant diseases

Most plant diseases we see in the SCG are fungal diseases. There is no way to kill all the fungi in the garden, and most of them are necessary and beneficial for plant growth. If you overwater, or do not give your plants enough air circulation, you may find parts of your plants have turned to gray spongy fuzz. This is a *botrytis*, a fungus. The damaged plant parts need to be removed from the garden and destroyed. Let the soil fully dry out in your garden between waterings to combat this. Another fungal disease that frequents the SCG is late blight on our tomatoes. Be warned, once in the soil it lasts six years. The easiest way to combat *tomato late blight*, is to not plant tomatoes or tomato-family plants (like tomatillo or eggplant) in the same place for six years. Since almost everyone wants to plant tomatoes in their plots at the SCG, practice good tomato plant hygiene as noted above under good habits. Also water tomatoes deeply about once a week, and mulch them with straw or something that prevents soil from splashing up onto the plant. Late blight looks like brown or yellow circles on leaves. When the leaves get wet, the spots can get fuzzy with spores of the blight. Scout your plants frequently for blight, and immediately remove any plant parts infected with blight. Report any instance of blight to the SCG via email so the other gardeners can act appropriately, too.