

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Critters in the garden - By Ann Cox

HEAD:

Critters in your garden

DEK:

Tips for keeping them where they belong

BODY:

Tell us if we're wrong: Your veggies are up and growing nicely, and your garden seems to have become a buffet table for all kinds of critters. Even if they don't actually *eat* your plants, they can do just as much damage by rooting around in all that nice, soft dirt and uprooting them. What can you do? Here are a few suggestions that might help.

Cats seem to love using your garden as a giant litter box, especially after you've tilled it. Yuck! To keep kitties out of your gardens and flower beds, exclude them by laying chicken wire flat on the ground around where you don't want them to be. Grass will grow right up through the wire so you can move as normal, but cats do not like to feel the wire under their paws. Another option would be to liberally shake red pepper around your plants. Cats will get it on their paws and lick it off; after this happens a few times, they will get the message.

Bunnies are cute to watch—as long as they aren't in *your* garden. Rabbits' favorite foods include green beans, which they will nibble right down to the base of the plant. They also like carrots, lettuce, peas, strawberries, raspberries, cilantro and the bark of young fruit trees, preferably apples. They do not like cucumbers, corn or squash. A chicken wire fence is a good deterrent for rabbits, but it should be buried about six inches in the soil and should be at least two feet high, making sure the mesh openings are smaller than two inches.

Another approach could be an electric fence, with one wire six inches above ground and a second wire twelve inches above ground. To guard against nibbles in your fruit trees, use tree wrap, burlap or even a piece of window screen wrapped loosely around the base of the trunk. Remember, bunnies can walk (hop) on top of snow, so make sure you wrap at least eighteen inches higher than the expected snow cover. Hot pepper, or even black pepper, sprinkled on young vegetable plants can help as well, but you'll need to reapply after each rain. Also remove bunnies' daytime hiding places, such as brush piles, and remove debris under bushes that are near your garden. Eliminating their hiding places will discourage them from hanging around.

Raccoons are tricky critters that you might find eyeing your sweet corn and almost any kind of fruit you may grow. They are like tanks: If they can't go through it or under it, they will climb over it, so normal fencing will not do. Try two-strand electric fencing for raccoons, one strand six inches above ground, the second strand at twelve inches. Use plastic or PVC pipes for poles; if you use wood poles, these little thieves will simply climb them. Another idea is a floppy fence, where you leave the top twelve inches

of the chicken wire fence free of its support poles. As raccoons climbs the fence, the loose top section will bend backward so far that they won't be able to get into the garden.

Remove other temptations by keeping a tidy yard and garden, and moving your dog and cat food inside. If you have a pet door, you might need to block it at night or when you are away, or buy a pet door with an electronic eye that opens when triggered by a sensor on your pet's collar. If you don't prevent their entry, you might wake up one morning to find them sitting on your kitchen table enjoying the bounty of your fruit bowl.

Domestic and wild animals are a joy to watch in their own environments. Taking a few key steps will keep them there.



PHOTO CAPTION (Filename: Critters01_bunny_photo by Jason Miller):
Rabbits will eat most vegetable crops right down to the soil. Keep them out with a chicken-wire fence, but be sure to bury the bottom six inches so they don't dig under it.
Photo by Jason Miller.



PHOTO CAPTION (Filename: Critters02_cat_photo by Jason Miller):

Cats are notorious for using gardens as their personal litter boxes. Exclude them by laying down chicken wire. Photo by Jason Miller.

References:

- *Rodale's Garden Problem Solver*, by Jeff Ball

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.