

# Rats & Other Vertebrate Pests

By Dave Pehling

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Have you ever laughed at the brilliant slapstick comedy in Bugs Bunny cartoons? The wise-cracking rabbit sneaks onto Elmer Fudd's farm, stealing carrots, tricking the befuddled farmer. With his trusty shotgun, Fudd puts lots of holes in trees, fenceposts and carrots – but never touching what the creature he called “that wascally wabbit.” Bugs sauntered away with the carrots, saying, “Ehhh, that's all, folks!”

These days I don't laugh when little tooth marks appear on my carrots and turnips. Where's that shotgun? Oh, I don't own one – and it never worked for Elmer Fudd. Too bad he hadn't contact his local Extension agent. Dave Pehling, a specialist at WSU Snohomish County Extension, would tell Fudd how to effectively protect his crops. “The introduced eastern cottontail rabbit is most often the culprit in lowland gardens,” says Pehling. “In a few places the domestic rabbit has been released and become naturalized, mostly in the San Juan Islands and urban areas.”

“Fencing the garden with 1 inch mesh or chicken wire is the best way to control rabbits,” says Pehling. “Fences only need to be 2 feet tall. In some cases, it's necessary to bury the bottom of the fence a few inches to discourage digging underneath.”



A two-foot fence of strong mesh can keep rabbits out of a garden. But these beans were planted too close to the mesh, and some rabbits munched the leaves. **Photo by David Pehling/WSU Snohomish Extension.**

## **Oh Rats!**

Composting yard and food waste turns debris into rich soil amendment or mulch. Worm bins are great for “recycling” food waste, but a compost pile presents challenges, since rats relish rotting kitchen scraps. “Rats are best kept out by using “rodent resistant” compost containers, especially if you compost food waste,” says Pehling.

“If material is composted in piles or non-rodent resistant compost bins, make it less attractive to rats. Turn the pile often, keep it damp and don’t add food waste. If rats become a problem, control with traps and/or registered rodenticides.” Always follow package instructions for rodenticide application and disposal.

## **Molehills or Mountains?**

Molehills can make mountains of headaches for people wanting a pristine lawn. Pehling says, “When constructing tunnels in firm soil, moles push the excavated soil to the surface, creating small hills. There are many damaging and illegal methods people use in vain attempts to control them. Pouring gasoline or used motor oil down the holes is about the WORST thing I can think of, damaging soil and polluting the environment. In one reported case, a European homeowner tried to electrocute moles using home-made high voltage soil probes - and ended up electrocuting himself.” A seamless green carpet around your house is not worth a fatal mistake!

Can we trap moles? “Initiative 713, passed by Washington voters in 2000, prohibits the use, but not the sale or ownership, of body gripping traps,” says Pehling. “Unfortunately, many people still use them. It’s a gross misdemeanor to use such traps, with the exception of “common rat and mousetraps,” to catch any animal in Washington State.”

Did I-713 stop an effective solution to the mole problem? “Lethal trapping removes the present mole,” says Pehling. “But in a well-established tunnel system there’s a strong probability another mole will move right in. When traps were still allowed, it was often necessary to catch several moles as they moved into “abandoned territory” before control was achieved. The following year a new crop of migrating young would often move in, and the process would have to be repeated.” Time well spent? Or would you rather dig in the garden yourself? Dogs and snakes are legal predators of moles, though dogs can create other problems on lawns.

“Moles mostly eat insects and worms,” says Pehling. Having your lawn sprayed to kill crane flies removes an important food source for moles. But before they leave your yard, they may increase digging in search of food. Research has found electronic, magnetic, and vibrational devices are not effective repellants. Gas cartridges and smoke bombs are also not reliable. When they detect gas, moles seal off their burrows in seconds.

Like the mole, the vole, another unwelcome garden digger, is native to North America. Both pests can be excluded from garden beds containing susceptible plants and bulbs by burying ¼-inch mesh hardware cloth at least one foot deep.

“Management is the correct term for dealing with these animals, as eradication is not practical nor ecologically sound,” says Pehling. “Voles mostly feed on plant material: roots, foliage (primarily grasses) and bark. In turn, they are the primary food source for all our small native hawks, owls and mammalian predators.”

### **Goodness Snakes!**

Once I was happy to find a slug in my garden – since it was deeply lodged in the mouth of a garter snake. These small snakes never harm humans, and are great predators, outrunning even the fastest slugs. Pehling says, “Western Washington snakes are entirely beneficial in gardens. All northwest varieties of garter snakes are voracious predators of slugs and rubber boas, though rare, eat small rodents.”

If you’re lucky enough to find a snake in your garden, just thank it silently and leave it to dine.

### **Castor-Oil Mole Repellant**

In a blender, combine 1/4 cup unrefined castor oil (buy at most pharmacies) with two tablespoons of dishwashing liquid. Add six tablespoons water, blend again. Dilute two tablespoons in one gallon water. With a watering can or sprayer, liberally apply solution to moist soil around surface tunnels made by moles. Spray entire area needing protection; moles will burrow under a perimeter treatment. Repellent may need to be reapplied. Once moles move elsewhere, solution is usually still effective for 30 to 60 days.

From “Living with Washington Wildlife,” by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

### **Rodent or Other Vertebrate Pest Problems?**

**Know and Grow Workshop** with Dave Pehling, WSU Extension Specialist

**When:** Tuesday, February 14, 1:00pm – 2:30pm. Free.

**Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and Extension Center  
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)

**Cost:** Free

Have a problem with rats, mice, voles, moles, squirrels, raccoons, gophers or mink? This Valentine’s Day you’ll love learning effective ways to control these pests. Questions? Call WSU Skagit County Extension Service: 360-428-4270 ext. 0.

## **RESOURCES**

- Living With Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest, Russel Link, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/book>
- Species Fact Sheets from Living With Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/nutria.html>
- Dave Pehling's favorite websites on vertebrate pest management: <http://snohomish.wsu.edu/garden/verturl.html>