

Garden Bandits

Our spring here in the Pacific Northwest was cold and wet, but finally the warm sunny weather arrived and your vegetable garden began to grow. Every day you check the tomatoes, peek into the row of beans, thump the melons, and squeeze the ears of corn. Guess what – there may be others keeping an eye on your garden too, and they do not have your best interests in mind. We'll talk about the most common uninvited visitors to your garden.

Voles and Moles may live under your garden, but they can do a lot of damage from there. Both of these varmints construct tunnels, but voles (being lazy or opportunistic) will often just take over an abandoned mole tunnel. Young plants can be uprooted during the tunnel-making process, and voles will eat the roots of smaller plants, causing them to wither and die. These tunnels can deprive your plants of water. Voles eat the bark of woody plants, causing them to die if they are completely girdled. Traps or cats are somewhat effective controls.



Rabbits love to make their home in a well-stocked vegetable garden, often nesting and raising a family right there under the squash plant. Food is readily available and those squash leaves provide good cover. Rabbits particularly crave lettuce, peas, beans, and carrots. They will eat tender new growth on beets, radishes, onions, and will even gnaw on young squash. The main crops safe from rabbits are tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, and corn. They also like many ornamental flowers. A chicken wire fence at least two feet tall and either buried or fastened to the ground is the best deterrent for rabbits. Live trapping may also be an option.

Both ground and tree **squirrels** will invade a vegetable garden. They like most of the same vegetables as rabbits, with peas and beans being their favorites. However, if you have a fruit or nut tree or a bird feeder nearby, they will choose that as their primary target. Fencing is not a good control method for squirrels since they can easily climb the fence. If the squirrel population becomes a big problem, live trapping can be effective.

Raccoons look the part of a bandit. Besides raiding garbage cans, they also love to visit your garden at night and they can do a lot of damage. Raccoons can climb corn stalks, often breaking the stalk in the process, then husk the corn, and eat it right there. You will be left with an intact, but empty, cob. At least they don't knock on the door and ask you to boil water for them! They also have a taste for tomatoes, melons, raspberries, and grapes. Again, a very tight-to-the-ground fence is the best way to keep raccoons out of the garden.

Dogs, whether they belong to you or the neighbor, can do a lot of digging. And they like to dig where the soil is loose and fluffy. Although they don't eat anything, they can trample and demolish quite a few plants while they dig and frolic. Some people may consider cats a nuisance, but their occasional use of the garden for their litter box is worth the occasional vole they consume.

Deer will probably eat everything in the garden, except perhaps herbs, artichokes, and rhubarb. Unlike some of the other bandits described, deer will eat the entire plant, so you have no hope of getting the second crop. If you have deer in the area, do not even think of planting a garden unless you are prepared to fence it securely.

There is one other potential bandit in your garden that should not be forgotten – **the neighbors**. Ever look out the window and see the back end of your neighbor sneaking through the fence – was that a head of lettuce in their hand? Is your corn ripe before theirs? Hmmm, it would be hard to resist... We won't offer any control methods for this bandit.

Enjoy what's left in your garden! As you crawl into bed tonight, don't worry about what is raiding your garden. Get a good night's sleep. Every tomato, ear of corn, and pea you have eaten has been well worth the fight.

References

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