

Gopher facts and tips for controlling them

There are few things more demoralizing to gardeners than stepping out to find our gardens ravaged by little beasts — tomatoes half eaten on the vines, perennials gnawed to the roots, or entire plants simply gone.

It's not so much the physical labor that went in to planting and tending our gardens, or the cost of plants, soil amendments and the water to grow them or even the loss of summer's bounty that was to be enjoyed and savored through the months.

No, it's the sudden disconnect with nature. At its very core, gardening is nature. With each raised bed and tilled plot, we create our own versions of Eden. We embrace nature, becoming one with it as we work hand-in-hand in cultivating the planet. And then nature — in the form of gophers, ground squirrels and rats — delivers a sucker punch.

There is no doubt at all that we would willingly share our gardens, but these four-legged denizens seem to want it all.

So what's a gardener to do? That's the question that Kathy Echols, horticulture instructor at Diablo Valley College, answered recently in one of the best-attended classes at Our Garden. Here are some gopher facts and

tips on trying to control them; lethal methods are posted online at www.ContraCostaTimes.com/home-garden and www.Inside-BayArea.com/home-garden.

Tips

■ Identify the problem. Many people assume any mound of dirt is the work of a gopher. Not so. Gopher mounds are oblong in shape. Mole mounds are round.

■ Gophers eat vegetative material; moles eat worms, grubs and insects. Only on rare occasions are moles a problem; only on extremely rare occasions are gophers

not a problem.

■ Gophers hate air in their holes so will backfill any openings. Moles aren't bothered by them.

■ Gopher tunnels can measure up to a mile in length; mole tunnels run just below the surface and will cause raised runs on the top of the ground.

■ Gophers can have several litters a year with the first usually appearing in December.

■ None of the deterrents and repellents now on the market are 100 percent effective. Some people report good results, some find their efforts futile.

■ Folk remedies that call for placing smelly or peppery items in the gopher hole usually only force the gophers to block off that part of the tunnel and move to another section.

■ The most effective way to stop gopher encroachment is to fence off your yard or garden area, burying a barrier at least 2 feet deep.

■ The root ball of every plant, shrub and tree can be encased in hardware cloth or some other material, although gophers have been known to find ways around it, launching an aboveground assault when the below

ground stops them. The root cages must be replaced every few years.

■ If you are successful in ridding your garden of gophers, you've probably only managed to direct them into your neighbor's yard, and then you may have a two-legged problem.

Class schedule

June 25: Plant propagation, Helen Erickson, Master Gardener

July 2: Independence Day holiday, no class

July 9: Birds and bees — boxes and holes, Brian Murphy

July 16: Composting, Linda Mizes, CCCSWA Home Compost Instructor

July 23: Container gardening, Shawna Anderson, Orchard Nursery

July 30: Gardening with wildlife, Gary Bogue, Bay Area News Group columnist

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About Our Garden

■ Our Garden is a joint project of the Bay Area News Group-East Bay and the UC Cooperative Extension, Contra Costa Master Gardeners. All produce is donated to help feed the hungry.

■ Classes are free, 10-11 a.m. Fridays. Master Gardeners are available 10 a.m.-noon to answer questions, diagnose ailing plants and identify pests.

■ Our Garden is at the Contra Costa Times building, 2640 Shadelands Drive, Walnut Creek. For more information, contact Joan Morris, Home & Garden editor, 925-977-8479 or jmorris@bayareanewsgroup.com.

— Joan Morris



BOB CAMPBELL/MCT

Gophers can be a pest in anyone's backyard.

