

# Garden Pests – Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



## **GROUNDHOGS (AKA WOODCHUCKS)**

Groundhogs are common in rural areas but are also making themselves at home in suburban areas near open land. Groundhogs are large members of the squirrel family, growing to a length of almost 60 cm and weighing 2 to 5 kg. Their colour is brown and their short tail is covered with fur. The front feet have powerful claws well-adapted for digging deep burrows.

Groundhog burrows can be as deep as 1.5 m with several entrance holes. Entrance holes, about 30 cm wide with a mound of soil around them, are usually well hidden and difficult to see. The network of tunnels can cover an area underground as large as five square kilometres. In these underground homes groundhogs hibernate, raise their young and hide from danger. A burrow system is maintained, kept clean of debris and used for several years.

Groundhogs do not usually travel more than 15-30 m from a den entrance in search of food. They breed in March and produce a single litter of two to six young. Groundhogs may become a problem to farmers and gardeners when they feed on trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables. The mounds of soil and large holes also present a hazard to farm equipment, cattle and horses.

### **Plants affected:**

They will eat wild grasses, leaves, soft fruits like berries, vegetables – anything green.

### **Evidence:**

Destruction and/or removal of fruits and vegetables in the garden overnight.

### **Management:**

- A strong, 1-1.5 m high wire fence buried 25-30 cm in the ground will help keep them out of a vegetable garden.
- Groundhogs are good climbers. An electric hot-shot wire placed 10 to 12 cm off the ground and the same distance outside the fence will prevent climbing and burrowing. These wires and transformers are available at farm supply stores.
- Discourage from living under a building by using strong repellents or by exclusion – installing wire mesh or hardware cloth to keep them out. Fencing or electric fence wire around the base of the shed is also useful. In the past, snakes were often considered effective.
- Scent Deterrents: hanging a sack of dog hair, sprinkling dry blood meal around target plants. These make the groundhog think that a predator is close by.
- Taste Deterrents: Plant garlic, onion, chives and/or marigolds near the plants you would like to protect or sprinkle garlic and onion powder on those plants for a similar effect. Plant a patch of clover or alfalfa to lure them away from your desired plants.
- The fresher these scents are the better the deterrent!



## **Moles**

Moles have pointed snouts, enlarged front feet, and eyes and ears so tiny they are not visible. They live underground in tunnels usually just below the surface, and are predatory in nature. Seldom seen above ground.

### **Plants affected:**

They do not eat bulbs, plants or roots but do damage lawns and gardens as they tunnel through plant roots in search of food.

They feed on earthworms, grubs, beetles and other animals or arthropods found in the soil.

### **Evidence:**

Tunnelling in lawns and gardens. Peak activity is in June and again in the fall.

### **Management:**

- Repair damage to lawn.
- A pest control expert.
- Grubs are their preferred food source, reduction of grub population usually controls moles.
- Mole traps can be used but require a lot of attention and are hit and miss.



### **Voles aka Meadow Mice**

Voles are a serious problem in commercial orchards and nurseries, where they feed on the lower bark of trees and shrubs.

They live in low-lying or creeping vegetation and make trails through the grass or snow. They also use mole tunnels.

They have rounded ears, body is reddish or brown and black with a gray underside.

#### **Plants affected:**

They are herbivores and feed on the roots of many ornamental plants and grasses, bulbs, bark and seeds.

#### **Evidence:**

Can often cause significant damage to trees and shrubs over winter.

#### **Management:**

- Control with cultural methods, habitat modification and by trapping.
- Mow lawns and turf areas regularly and pull mulch away from trunks of trees and ornamentals to prevent voles from hiding in the mulch and chewing bark.
- Voles will avoid digging in pea gravel. Lay it at the base of fruit trees before winter.
- Till garden soil prior to winter to reduce vole damage. It removes cover, destroys existing runway burrow systems and kills a percentage of the existing vole population.
- Mouse traps with a peanut butter-oatmeal mixture or apple slices are effective baits for trapping. Trap should be placed perpendicular to the surface runways with the trigger end in the runway.



## **Squirrels**

There are four species of squirrels in Ontario - the larger eastern gray squirrel, the smaller red squirrel, the northern flying squirrel and the southern flying squirrel. Squirrels eat a variety of foods ranging from tree fruits, seeds, nuts, buds, shoots, insects and fungi. Often, in their search for food, they destroy the growing tips of young trees and shrubs, strip bark from trees and dig up flowers and bulbs. Squirrels are most active in the early morning and late afternoon.

### **Damage:**

Homeowners have problems with squirrels chewing through siding and tearing open attic vents to gain access to the house. Once inside the attic they can ruin insulation, damage wiring and stored items. They damage low voltage landscape lighting, gnawing on wires to get at the soy-based insulation.

They also eat a large volume of bird seed. Special types of 'squirrel proof' bird feeders are available to foil their attempts at robbing bird feeders.

### **Management:**

- If hanging a feeder in a tree, it should be at least 2.5 m from the trunk and 50 cm from any walls. For tray feeders, position a baffle at 15 – 20 cm below the feeder and 1.25 m above the ground. This will dissuade squirrels and raccoons from climbing up.

### **Plants affected:**

Many bulbs and plants including beans, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplants, flower containers dug up.

**Evidence:** Dug up flower bulbs, with bites from them, missing blossoms and fruit with bite marks.

### **Management:** (Control in the garden is difficult)

- When planting new bulbs, enclose them in a loose cage of heavy but open-mesh hardware cloth or chicken wire
- Spray plants with ingredients such as peppermint oil or vinegar and reapply after it rains.
- Include water in your garden as sometimes the squirrels are thirsty and therefore look for moisture in plants.
- Predator urine can be used around the yard to scare off animals including squirrels, rabbits and deer, reapplying after it rains.
- Motion-activated sprinklers may work for a while. For new plants use pinwheels or hang old compact disks or recycled aluminum pie tins from stakes to add noise and movement to the garden.
- Install a cage, plastic bird netting, chicken wire, and summer weight row covers to provide protection.
- Protect your harvest by wrapping individual fruits on tomato, eggplant, or other vegetable plants in small pieces of bird netting.