

Whose turf is it anyway? by Edythe Falconer

It's 7:45 am. We hear a crash and discover that an exterior window has a large hole in the centre with cracks radiating in every direction. We conclude that it is not a bullet hole. A bullet would have pierced both inner and outer panes.

We step outside expecting to see a dead bird, but see only deer tracks. Later Roy notices telltale signs in front of the garage. They look like the claw and wing marks of a medium-sized bird trying to regain its equilibrium after a nasty encounter with a human habitat. We, and various creatures out here, regularly compete for territory, produce and space - sometimes with catastrophic results.

We've been in the habit of growing pumpkins for our granddaughters' Halloweens. A few years ago we had only two future jack o'lanterns doing well. One morning we noticed that the medium one had completely disappeared. Two mornings later, a large hole had been punched in the remaining pumpkin. Deer mischief.

This year we had a bumper crop of pumpkins strategically planted behind a barrier composed of recycled swimming pool fence and cedar posts salvaged from the ice storm. Fences have their limitations, though. I won't be trying corn again until I can cage it. Raccoons had a field day with the last stand.

Tulips have prospered inside this fence. Previously I had lost a substantial investment in bulbs as deer and rabbit chewed plants down until they were garden "history". Mice don't mind a tasty bulb or two, either. Planting bulbs a bit deeper than recommended mitigates the mice problem but doesn't help with deer and rabbits.

Then there are my ambitions for dwarf and semi-dwarf fruit trees. Some are doing fine behind a five foot fence surrounded by a wall of lilacs, honeysuckle, wild grape vines and cedar trees. Outside the fence, however, the deer regularly chew dwarf apple trees. In seven years these trees have never bloomed, let alone borne fruit. It gets worse. Just recently I read that deer saliva has a substance in it that inhibits branch regeneration.

Deer damage is truly annoying. Envision, if you will, healthy foliage with blossoms chopped off, an array of bare stems sticking out like a bad horticultural haircut. Nothing is immune to these voracious herbivores. I've read books on deer deterrents. Applying all of the suggestions would be a full time occupation. Deer soon get used to each of our meager defenses.

For some time after moving here we were deer and rabbit free but then they discovered our "all-you-can-eat-buffet". We were groundhog free until last year. I welcomed the intruder by repeatedly filling its burrow with stones. It relocated the stones several times before giving up. Or, perhaps it didn't give up. Perhaps it was eaten up. There are fox and coyotes around.

This past year voles found us. Voles are vegetarians. They especially liked our broccoli, kohlrabi and beet leaves. Several dead voles later, the damage ceased but we think we must have had help. Voles are active little lovers who can produce several litters per year. Help could have come from a shy black cat that was around all summer and probably enjoyed the voles as much as the voles liked our vegetables. Or perhaps a fox assisted in the hunt.

Late this summer we noticed something curled up and sunning itself on the rim of a stone cistern. It looked like a large orange tabby, but the ears weren't right. When I tapped on the kitchen window a gorgeous red fox sat up. Eventually it hopped down and trotted out to the back forty. I seriously considered putting kibble out to encourage it to "take out" more voles.

A couple of years ago, I decided to build toad houses in the garden as a form of insect control. The houses consisted of bricks topped with a flat rock. A small pan of water was placed inside. I became confused about my goals when I noted, some days later, a glittering green garter snake winding its way out of one of the toad abodes.

For snakes, one insect - or a small toad - is as good as another - beneficial or otherwise. Snakes love our greenhouse with its southern exposure. Roy has discovered, to his delight, that they will stop in their tracks, do a U-turn, coil upward and listen when he whistles to them. What's not to love?

I often daydream about how delightful it would be if deer would deadhead the right things at the right time, if voles ate only excess vegetation, if the black cat and the fox would concentrate on voles, if birds would learn to thin young shoots correctly, if squirrels would stay out of chimneys and eaves and frolic in front of the appropriate window, and would eat only wormy, windfall apples.

Instead we play in a symphony of conflicting interests. What began with a resounding crash finishes with whistling to snakes and Utopian fantasies. At present we are in some sort of balance, but it is the critters for the most part, who have written the score for our cohabitation on these acres of Eden.

We've nothing to complain about. We enjoy some flowers, some vegetables and some fruit. Whether it sports roots, fruits, legs, or no legs, we've come to appreciate whatever each year brings.