

Managing Wildlife in High Altitude Gardens

By Colorado Master Gardener Apprentice, Michelle Bivens and edited by Mark Platten

It seems we survive the early and late freezes, recover from the wind and hail, and somehow manage to get something to grow only to have deer, voles, pocket gophers, and rabbits consume the remaining plants.

Deer are browsers by nature. They walk along sampling anything that looks appetizing. They often grab and pull as they walk by, or munch all the flowers from the stems. Rabbits, on the other hand, leave nice clean teeth marks on leaves and stems and will usually eat one or two plants next to each other. Deer will eat most plants when hungry; therefore there are no “deer proof” plants.

You can make a garden less appealing to the deer by planting “deer resistant” plants. In general they tend to stay away from very aromatic plants such as herbs, plants with bitter tastes, prickles and spines, tough leathery leaves, and milky sap. The plants in my garden that they have never touched include: all varieties of poppies, peonies, iris, daisies, yarrows, black-eyed Susans, bee balm, daffodils, alliums, blanket flowers, and sage.

Contact repellents are applied directly to plants causing them to taste bad. Area repellents are placed in a problem area and repel by their foul odor. Repellents are generally more effective on less preferred plants. There are many home remedies including hot sauce, mothballs, aromatic soap, egg solution, etc., which vary in their effectiveness. Repellants are also effective for rabbits and ground squirrels.

Unfortunately repellants are not recommended for the vegetable garden. To protect vegetables from deer-browsing an eight-foot fence is required. Lightweight deer fencing can be purchased at many garden stores and, when installed along the perimeter of the garden, does an excellent job of keeping deer out.

In addition to deer, voles and pocket gophers can attack landscape and vegetable gardens. Voles are similar to mice but construct many surface runways and underground tunnels with numerous burrow entrances. Voles inflict damage by eating the bark around the trunks of young trees or shrubs, killing the plant.

To protect against vole damage, encircle young trees and shrubs with 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth or 3-inch diameter Vexar plastic-mesh cylinders. This barrier should project 18 inches above the ground and 3 to 6 inches below the surface. Vegetable and flower beds may also be protected in this manner.

Pocket gophers live in underground tunnels and rarely are seen. They feed on the roots they encounter while tunneling. The plant dies “suddenly” or is occasionally pulled underground to be dined upon in the tunnel.

The only method to exclude pocket gophers is to prevent them from tunneling up from underground into the garden. An effective approach is to plant vegetables in raised beds which are lined on the bottom with ¼” wire mesh.

Another approach is to create container gardens. Baskets can be hung from shepherds hooks, trees, or the deck although the deer may still come by to snack.

For questions regarding produce, landscape, and horticulture questions; please contact the Teller County, Colorado Master Gardener grow line at 686-7980, visit our website at www.co.teller.co.us/csu or visit our booth at the Woodland Park farmers’ market.