

Rabbits in the Garden

Silly rabbits – those plants are for me! These cute little creatures are both multiplying rapidly and damaging many landscapes in our area. We will review some options to protect gardens from damage including natural repellents, plant protection techniques and utilizing plants are less prone to rabbits. Hoping we will have some fun and share ideas on how to send these pests to your neighbor's yard

The Rabbit Explained

Two types of rabbits are considered native to Western Washington – the Snowshoe Hare and Eastern Cottontail. Domesticated rabbits that are released or escape can also be a nuisance. They tend to never stray very far, so look close to home for sites where they nest for sure. They have excellent senses of smell, eyesight and hearing. Rabbits have only one blind spot right in front of their noses. They create shallow burrows, even in turf areas, lined with grasses, leaves and fur where young can be cared for and develop. Cottontails (rabbits) will do this, while the hares are precocial (meaning they can fend for themselves and eat immediately after birth). This means far more developed young with eyes open and covered in hair. Thus hares can leave their mothers after a month, while the rabbits are born hairless and need mom for months after being born. Some rabbit/hare facts to keep in mind.....

- Both types are prolific breeders for sure. Rabbits will have as many as 4 litters of 4-7 young over spring through summer each year. Hares will have 2-3 litters of 1-7 young between April through August each year.
- Snowshoe Hares can reach 25-20 MPH to avoid being lunch, while Cottontails are not as fast moving in a zig-zag pattern when fleeing to aid in their survival.
- They will be most active from dusk till dawn overnight, spending the daylight hours hiding in underbrush or other shelter. Want to find them? Get a flashlight at night and scour around carefully. They can be spotted with either glowing yellow or red eyes at night by doing this.
- Snowshoe Hares – Darkish Brown in color with tail that has a dusky to white colored undersides. They do not change color in winter in our area. They tend to have larger hind feet, and adults weigh in the 2-3 pound neighborhood.
- Eastern Cottontails – these are non-native to the PNW but were introduced in 1930s as game and have found a home here. These are typically what we see as they have adapted to urban environments quite well and often are found in our landscapes. They can reach about 17" in length and have lightish brown color. You can spot these when they run with the white underside on their tails.
- Rabbit poop – both types may leave over a hundred pellets per day! Hare droppings tend to be a little larger and flatter than the rabbit. Both can be varied in color from greenish brown to blackish depending on how much grass they are chomping. There is always a chance of rabbit carrying a parasite, but poop is it known to transmit any diseases to humans.
- Their droppings tend not to burn anything, but rather make an excellent choice for compost pile as a coveted source of Nitrogen (and some Phosphorus unlike other manures). It is considered a "cold" manure and has no danger of burning like other choices – you can put it right around plants fresh.
- Consider making rabbit compost tea – placing droppings in 5 gallon bucket with water. This can be stirred and should sit for a couple days, producing wonderful fertilizer that can be poured around plants in the garden.
- Keep in mind in many cultures the rabbit is thought to bring fertility, luck, and creativity and symbolizes compassion and intuition as well. To find them in the garden is thought of as a blessing. Maybe share a bit?

Damage They Cause

Because of their size and quickness, rabbits can be one of the most frustrating garden pests to deter. They will forage on grasses and other vegetation spring through fall, and switch to cambium and other plants over winter as needed. In all honesty a hungry rabbit will eat just about anything if that is all there is – just as we would in some circumstances. Damage is always noticeable as sharp and clean angular cuts low to the ground. Sometimes this is a free pruning service of some kind and plants recover – but often they take a bit too much and the plant does not bounce back. This can be particularly frustrating in the vegetable garden for sure. I would let them mow my lawn if they could just do it evenly and quit missing patches here and there for sure!

Trapping of Rabbits

In honesty this may not be feasible for most and it really transfers the problem from your area to another. Relocated rabbits/hares become disoriented, often succumbing to predators or getting hit by cars. In the natural world these creatures have already filled areas where they can thrive in the wild. Both resident and relocated rabbits will struggle as this adds competition to the detriment of both parties. It may make you feel better, but often relocated one really does not have a new home. Relocation may also transfer potential harmful disease from one locale to another. Also be sure trapping is legal in your particular area, as well as the transportation of rabbits. They are considered a game animal and can be hunted in most rural areas with proper permit. In urban settings hunting should be avoided for sure. Always check with the Department of Wildlife for regulations on both trapping and hunting.

In my opinion, trapping/relocation and finally hunting are last resorts after other options have been tried and resistant plants have been planted. Final option at that point may be to trap. If you go this route, look online for options. Typically use a double door trap with heavy doors so they cannot escape. Suitable rabbit traps are usually about 9" tall/wide and around 26" long or so, and often those for hares are little bigger than that. Utilize fresh veggies in summer as bait and apples/carrots/bread in winter to tempt them. Place traps in traffic areas or near susceptible plants, and leave some bait outside as well to draw them in. Sometimes spraying the trap with apple juice will help entice them to enter as well.

Techniques to Deter Rabbits

Like with all our wildlife friends, sometimes a multi-pronged approach is needed. One thing may work for me, one thing for you, and neither works for another kind of thing. Below is a list of options to consider, a checklist if you will, and a gardener going to rabbit war should consider all of them. More than one may need to be implemented, and one technique may work in one area of the garden but not in another. There is A LOT of information out there, especially on the internet, to contemplate and then put into practice.

1, Install fence around garden beds. Duh, right? Fence must be wire, like chicken wire, and preferably not wood. Thicker the gauge the longer it will last before rusting. Should be 3' tall and buried 6" into the ground, and ideally rolled outwards at top away from the garden to keep them from jumping it. At base one foot of the wire fence can also be laid out on ground to prevent them from getting close and digging under as well. Be sure to stake with sturdy stakes, and also pin/stake the front flap into place as well. Make sure gates/fences have no gaps they can squeeze through or burrow under for sure! For bulbs, try a cage or chicken wire cage over the area. If you have an existing fence, you can always add this 2-3 foot barrier at base. Remember these creatures are more willing to go under the fence than over it!

2. Perhaps try mirrors as rabbits do not like their own reflection. A well-placed mirror, or even a bucket of water may help deter them or help protect a special plant they like that has been frequented. This one could be interesting.....

3. Repellents are always an option. Be sure to check labels and decide what is safe for you, your plants, and the environment. Predator urine, Blood Meal, Dog Hair (or human for that matter), Egg Solids, Thyme Oil, Garlic/Onions, Bone Meal, Citrus Juice, Cayenne Pepper, Vinegar and many other ingredients can be explored and tried. See below for more on this!
4. Consider using smells of things they detest – for example the Onion listed above. Onion plants could be planted around problem areas, or even cut up onions sprinkled around susceptible areas. Maybe utilize Irish Spring Soap, Hot Peppers, Garlic or even Talcum Powder. Perhaps not foolproof but worth a try for sure.
5. Remove nesting sites, especially looking in turf areas. Almost look like random patch of dead grass, you peel it up and there are the little ones. Other potential areas include holes in ground and piles of debris/leaves they can burrow under. Block access to areas under decks and the house for sure. Remember these creatures stay close to home, so eliminating nesting sites means they hopefully move elsewhere. Just don't tell your neighbors and act surprised!
6. Tall weedy patches and even rock piles may offer them shelter during day, allowing them to stay out of view from natural predators like Owls, Hawks, and even Coyote. Protect your pets from the Coyote for sure, but consider even adding a nesting site/perch for an owl or hawk, they will help when catching dinner each day.
7. Utilize raised beds/containers which they tend to leave alone. They will always prefer to dig under and rarely will hop up in most cases. This can be accomplished with a number of materials and offer years of safe gardening for sure. Think of my poor Pansies 😊
8. Maybe create a rabbit area just for them, like a patch of clover away from the main garden. Allowing them to have an area may keep them from getting into other areas you do not want them to devour.
9. Electric netting can be effective but be sure to inspect regularly as sometimes these creatures will chew right through the nodes rendering sections inoperable. This is intended for seasonal use, and may offer an effective choice for seasonal flower or veggie gardens.
10. Use a cloche or even a plastic milk jug with the bottom cut out for seedlings to get them going in spring. Jugs will offer some frost protection as a bonus as well. There are a huge number of attractive and decorative clothes online, and home made ones are option also.
11. For a single valuable specimen, try a 1" chicken wire cage buried in 6" to ground 3' high, but also left away from trunk so they cannot press on it and nibble through mesh into bark/branching. If you go this route, be sure to keep debris/leaves from collecting inside the fence – this may be a spot for other creatures like mice/voles to hang out. Sometimes for single trunks also consider nylon mesh, temporary plastic tubes, or even double wrapped aluminum foil.
12. Get a dog, but make sure that dog is cool with being outside, especially at night to be effective!
13. Try all sorts of things like bird scare tape, old mylar balloons, or mylar tape above valuable specimens or problem areas. Often urban rabbits don't care about these things, or they will become quickly used to them rendering them ineffective, but again worth a try.
14. Try a sonic device to scare them, but don't think this will work in all circumstances as they may become used to the noise and render this one ineffective. This is one I am in the process of evaluating right now.

Plants Rabbits Will Tend To Avoid

A hungry rabbit will eat just about anything in all honesty, but there are plenty of choices they will tend to avoid here and there. A key is to plant variety in the garden and incorporate some plants they do not care for in specific areas. You will see common traits here – fragrant foliage, lots of greyish foliage, and foliage that are typically non smooth. Lavender and Rosemary are prime examples at the top of the resistant list.

Vegetables/Herbs

Onions, Garlic, Asparagus, Peppers, Tomatoes, Potatoes, Summer Squash, Rhubarb, Artichokes, Basil, Lavender, Rosemary, Thyme, Oregano, Sage, Catnip

Annuals

Zinnia, Marigold, Snapdragon, Alyssum, Wax Begonia, Nasturtium, Geranium, Nicotiana

Perennials/Groundcovers

Bergenia, Nepeta, Monarda, Cimicifuga, Delphinium, Digitalis, Eryngium, Hellebore, Phlox, Achillea, Ajuga, Astilbe, Alchemilla, Brunnera, Cerastium, Geum, Helianthus, Hemerocallis, Iberis, Kniphofia, Lamium, Leucanthemum, Ophiopogon, Rudbeckia, Veronica, Stokesia, Sedum, Anemone, Pervoskia, Ferns, Agastache, Aquilegia, Polemonium, Rubus, Stachys, Convallaria, Gaillardia, Clematis, Euphorbia, Artemisia, Penstemon, Miscanthus, Fragaria, Liriope, Oxalis, Polygonatum, Baptisia, Papaver, Peony, Heuchera, Dicentra, Primrose, Epimedium, Pulmonaria, Zauschneria

Shrubs/Trees

Abelia, Boxwood, Cotinus, Heptacodium, Weigela, Cotoneaster, Yucca, Conifers, Euonymus, Ilex, Kalmia, Mahonia, Sarcococca, Acer, Cornus, Cercis, Erica, Lonicera, Ribes, Daphne, Deutzia, Sambucus, Viburnum, Spiraea, Vitis, Hydrangea, Syringa, Philadelphus

Organic Repellents

All kinds of home remedies are out there to explore, some of which may help, others may not. Be sure to always read the label! Wear gloves when working with repellents for sure. Keep in mind solutions should be reapplied frequently, especially after rains or after irrigation/sprinklers are utilized. Apply ALWAYS when new growth has occurred, perhaps even after heavy dew. Any of these may render products ineffective when not reapplied. Most of these create film on foliage that renders it inedible, or not so tasty to our rabbit friends. You will see some “fragrant” ingredients with many, and could even add predator urine, vinegar, citrus juice, coffee grounds, bone meal, and blood meal to the list below. Many of these simple ingredients can be found to purchase if you wish to make your own home remedy as well. Essentially that is the gardener’s choice – repel by smell, by taste, or both.

Whole Egg Solids – organic repellents may or may not contain these, but often do. HUGE caution is in the vegetable garden and with edibles. Products with this ingredient should be avoided on all edibles as Salmonella infection is possibility.

Liquid Fence RTU (Ready To Use Liquid) – natural, biodegradable and safe to humans and pets when used correctly. Good rain resistance when used, cutting down reapplication a bit. Can be used year around and has no scent. Apply directly onto ornamental plants in the landscape. Can be found in large gallon jug or typical quart trigger sprayer. (Ingredients - Egg Solids, Garlic Oil, Thyme Oil).

Liquid Fence Concentrate – same as above, but add in value for concentrate to save money. Animals don’t have to eat foliage to be effective – the smell of spray is aversion to rabbits/hares as well as deer. (Ingredients - Egg Solids, Garlic Oil, Thyme Oil).

Solar Powered Sonic Device from Lubatis – Available on Amazon in 4 pack. First keep in mind solar needs sun, so may be a little tough in certain times around here if you know what I mean. These repel all kinds of things around the house when used properly. Each emitter does about 33 feet or so. They have a built in motion detector which helps. Sonic frequencies are set to bother wildlife but not humans or pets. Can be simply staked into ground in problem areas or even mounted on fence or structure.

Solar Powered Sonic Stakes from Digerger – Available on Amazon in 6 pack – follow same details above. These could be placed about 100 feet apart, or coverage up to 7,000 square feet, creating deterrent in any landscape. Even works in open areas like lawns. Both of these sonics are high quality waterproof devices with good solar panels.

Plantskydd – This is a useful choice available in two forms for both general landscape use and also edibles. Even granular choice if that is better for larger areas. Be sure to read label – can applied to edibles up to 4 weeks before harvest – then not! Should be sprayed every 3-4 weeks in growing season, once every 3 months in dormant times. Needs to be applied in dry weather and is rainproof in 24 hours. Broad spectrum of used including with bulbs (dip them in solution, allow to dry, then plant) and works on most all creatures. Key with rabbits is apply on foliage up a foot or so on plants, making sure to coat undersides of leaves as well. One of these quart size bottles will do about 100 plants 1 foot tall – it goes a long ways for sure! (Ingredients - Dried Blood, Vegetable Oil).

Nature's Mace Repellent – A granular option that may prove useful around the landscape. Repels effectively with natural odors and scents. One bag covers about 6000 square feet, and being granular will last longer than liquids. Easy to apply at ground level for battle against the rabbits. Works year around and doesn't wash off as easily as others. All natural product and safe for humans, pets, and birds. Has more active ingredient than others on the market. Apply about 2 feet in front of beds (about a 2 foot wide swathe) and reapply once a month in growing season for best results. (Ingredients - Egg Solids, Peppermint Oil, Dried Blood, Garlic).

Rabbit Scram – Promising choice that seems to work nicely in the landscape. This repels by scent again, smells like death to rabbit, but not as much to us. Maybe keep away from the porches as it does have light odor, but not super unpleasant to humans. Lasts a long time (about 30-45 days) when applied as granular. This one uses the rabbit's excessive sense of smell against them. Safe and natural for any place in the yard – including vegetable garden. One 2# bag does about 1000 square feet. Can be spread as a perimeter defense or evenly on plants as well. You can find HUGE tubs of this online as well to save \$\$\$\$\$. (Ingredients - Dried Blood, White Pepper, Clove, Garlic).

In Conclusion

After considering your options, make the choice that is right for you and your locale. It may come down to how red in face you are – declare open warfare or live with them? I suspect many will find a happy medium and try some natural ways to help nudge them down the road. Remember, if these creatures are hungry they may eat just about anything.