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Solving Problems with Rabbits



Damage from cottontail rabbits is almost always the result of feeding activities in yards and gardens. Rabbits may eat flower and vegetable plants in

the spring and summer, and fruit trees and ornamentals in the fall and winter. Plants browsed by rabbits can be identified by their neat, clipped appearance (plants browsed by deer appear ragged and torn), and pea-sized rabbit droppings scattered around the area will further clue you in. Of course, you may also catch rabbits in the act of plundering your crops—they tend to be most active at dusk and dawn.

The most effective, permanent protection for gardens subject to rabbit damage is a well-constructed fence. Chicken wire supported by posts every six to eight feet is strong enough to exclude rabbits. Such fences normally need only be about two feet high. Make sure the bottom is either buried six to eight inches or staked securely to the ground to prevent rabbits from pushing underneath it. When rabbit presence is only sporadic or occasional, new plantings can be protected by using commercially sold cloches or one-gallon plastic containers that have the bottoms cut out and are placed over the seedling to provide protection.

To protect vulnerable young trees and saplings from bark damage by rabbits, barriers such as commercial tree wrap may be effective. Cylinders of hardware cloth or chicken wire (usually self-supporting) may also be used; place them around the trunks to a height equal to the expected snow depth, plus another 12–18 inches. Be sure to include low-hanging branches that are within reach of rabbits inside the barriers. Routine pruning done in the fall will provide a decoy food source for the rabbits if trimmings are left on the ground. Rabbits find twigs and buds more desirable than bark, so they'll concentrate their feeding there.

If fencing is impractical, or damage is so slight that fencing is not cost-effective, small plots and individual plants can be protected with chemical repellents. Care should be taken, however, not to use a repellent on plants that will be eaten (unless the label specifies otherwise). Removing dense cover around gardens and orchards can also help reduce damage from rabbits. However, consideration should be given to the potential impact this could have on other desirable species, such as songbirds.

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