

Non chemical control of rabbits



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There are 9 species of cottontail rabbits in the US. They tend to concentrate in brushy areas where food and cover are suitable. Rabbits only live 12-15 months but with the ability to have 2-6 litters per year their numbers can surge when conditions are favorable.

Rabbits eat flowers and vegetables in spring and summer. In fall and winter the diet switches to woody materials. During severe winter conditions, their concentrated browsing can be intense enough to kill bushes.

Rabbit damage can be distinguished from deer browsing by the sharp angled cut on twigs and gnawing on the lower portions older woody growth.

Habitat Modification

Clearing brushy cover, removing brush piles, weed patches, stone piles and other debris will make an area less attractive to rabbits.

Exclusion

The only permanent way to prevent rabbit damage to crops is by exclusion. Exclusion is most often accomplished by the construction of fences and gates around the area to be protected. Woven wire or poultry netting should exclude all rabbits from the area to be protected. Use wire mesh smaller than 1 ½ inches, 30 to 36 inches high (higher in deep snow areas), with the bottom 6 inches buried below ground level. Bending the bottom 6 inches out from the garden and tacking it to the ground will usually be as effective as burying the fence. Poultry netting made of 20-gauge wire can provide protection for 5 to 7 years or more. Remember to spread the initial cost over the expected life of the fence when comparing fencing with other methods. Exclusion by fencing is desirable for small areas of high-value crops such as gardens, but is usually impractical and too expensive for larger acreages of farmland.

Protect the trunks of young trees or vines by installing cylinders made from woven wire netting. Cylinders should be 24 inches high (or 15 inches above maximum snow depth), anchored with steel rods and braced away from the trunk to prevent rabbits from pressing them against the trees and gnawing through them.

Types of tree protectors commercially available include aluminum, nylon mesh wrapping, and treated jute cardboard. Aluminum foil, or even ordinary sacking, has been wrapped and tied around trees with effective results.

Repellants and Frightening Devices

Dogs can be located along boundaries of crop fields or near gardens to deter rabbits.

Lights and ultrasonic devices provide no benefits as long-term rabbit scare devices.

Motion activated scare devices work well to keep rabbits out of an area. Several manufacturers such as Havahart® and Guardener® have models that work well.

Various organic repellents are commercially offered as a means of reducing or preventing rabbit damage to trees, vines, or farm and garden crops. Currently available commercial repellents include soaps, hot sauce, dried blood, and putrefied eggs. Repellents are limited by the necessity to reapply them after significant amounts of wet weather and the inability to apply them to plant parts meant for human consumption.

Trapping

Trapping with box-traps is an effective way to remove rabbits. The smaller, 4X4X15-inch traps work well. Carrots or leafy alfalfa make good cold-weather baits. Fresh apples, carrots, cabbage and other fresh vegetables are good baits in warmer weather. Be sure to replace the bait if it dries out. It helps to prebait the trap site to get the rabbits used to the bait before placement of the trap.

When an animal is live-trapped, there is often a desire to release the animal at a distant location. Research has shown this may not be a desirable nor humane option. If a rabbit is released, it will normally try to return to its home. They almost always die of exposure, starvation, predation, etc. Putting it with an existing population will be futile because the resident animals will drive it away. The author recommends drowning as a humane way of disposing of live-trapped rabbits.

Snares can be placed in rabbit runways or at the entrance to holes they are using. Small mammal snares are available online. Use snares with self-locking mechanisms to keep the snare from loosening on the rabbit. Check for tracks on runways in snow or dirt surfaces and suspend the anchored snare from a support wire so the bottom of a 3-inch loop is suspended 1 inch above the ground.

Be sure to check with local wildlife officials on the legality of trapping and snaring rabbits.

Other Methods

Where safe and legal to do so, shooting rabbits may suppress or eliminate damage.

Natural enemies of jackrabbits include hawks, owls, eagles, coyotes, bobcats, foxes, and weasels. While predation will not eliminate the population, presence of predators will provide some useful assistance in rabbit control. Even without actual killing of the rabbits, predators may make rabbits stay closer to cover and away from more open garden areas.

Acknowledgments

Much of the information presented here was adapted from S.E. Hygnstrom (1994) in *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.

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