

Rabbits

GWF383

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Rabbits can be extremely destructive and persistent garden pests. After years of low population numbers, the wild rabbit is now making a comeback.

Q What sort of damage is caused by rabbits?

A Rabbits can cause a lot of damage, clearing whole sowings of vegetables and newly planted borders as well as killing trees and shrubs by gnawing the bark. They also uproot plants when burrowing. Although primarily a menace in rural areas, they seem to be making inroads into the outskirts of towns where conditions suit them.

Q How do they do so much damage?

A Rabbits are formidable breeders. The female, or doe, can have young at about four to six months old and may have up to five litters per year, each of four or more young. Breeding takes place from January to August. Rabbits are also wary animals - born survivors - with a knack for evading predators. They live in groups so if you are unlucky, you could find very large groups - 30 or more, including several families - near your garden.

Q Are rabbits always a menace?

A Fortunately, their population goes up and down according to the season, weather and disease. Their numbers peak after the breeding season in late summer. The disease myxomatosis is also at its peak then, which can limit numbers. Rabbits don't like wet and cold as they originate from North Africa and Spain - they were introduced to Britain about 800 years ago. In

winter, their numbers can fall dramatically, but even in a bad year, enough survive to repopulate.

Q What has happened to myxomatosis?

A Although this unpleasant disease wiped out 99 per cent of rabbits when it was first introduced about 50 years ago, the most deadly strains are now extinct. They have been replaced with lesser strains that spare about 30 per cent of rabbits. Also, rabbits seem to have become more resistant to the disease. Another factor is that myxomatosis is spread by rabbit fleas. More rabbits live above ground now, where there are fewer opportunities for fleas to spread than in underground burrows.

Q Could another disease be introduced?

A Another disease was recently introduced in Australia and New Zealand, called rabbit haemorrhagic fever virus or rabbit calicivirus. It is said to be present in Britain, but its effect on the wild population here is unclear as yet.

Q How do I know if rabbits are at work in my garden?

A Rabbits prefer to feed at night, though you may see them feeding in daylight during the long days of summer, especially at dawn or dusk. Favourite spots include on the fringes of natural cover; a hedge or shrubbery. In dense vegetation, you may not see rabbits

at work, so the damage is the first thing you notice.

Other pests that cause similar damage to rabbits include birds, which leave ragged edges to leaves, and slugs, which make holes in leaves. Deer and hares nibble and gnaw higher up the plant than rabbits do. Voles and mice seldom graze plants right off, as rabbits do.

When rabbits are about, there will be little scuffle-marks in the soil and piles of round, pea-sized droppings, especially on tree stumps and other raised spots.

Q Could I mistake rabbits for anything else?

A You might sometimes mistake rabbits for hares. Hares are bigger when adult, live alone and have longer back legs and black-tipped ears. Their coat is sandy brown. They are becoming uncommon, so think twice before attempting to get rid of them.

Q Why are rabbits on the increase?

A The decline of myxomatosis is probably the main cause, though recent drier weather, mild winters and more burrowing sites - such as overgrown railway embankments, set-aside agricultural land and wind-felled trees - are all thought to have assisted their increase.

Q Can I deter rabbits?

A Deterrents don't seem very effective. In our trials, most

rabbits were oblivious to them. However, protecting plants with prickly twigs and leaves did seem to have some effect.

Q Can I trap them?

A Trapping needs a lot of skill. Also, as fast as rabbits are taken, more are likely to come in from outside the garden. However, traps are very useful for getting rid of rabbits caught in the garden after fencing the perimeter. Remember, you are required by law not to inflict unnecessary suffering on wild animals. So, if you want to try trapping, use live-capture cage traps. The downside is that the caught rabbits have to be disposed of. You will be very unpopular if you release them on other people's land, but killing them humanely is not for the squeamish. If you are confident, you can dispose of the rabbits - traps and instructions are obtainable from specialist pest control suppliers. Otherwise, get a professional to trap the rabbits for you.

Q Can I poison or gas them?

A Absolutely not. Poisoned animals pose a serious threat to wildlife and pets. Licensed professionals only are allowed to gas rabbits in their burrows.

Q Can I use ferrets?

A A local ferreter can get rid of many rabbits, but as fast as rabbits are taken, more are likely to come in from outside the garden.

Q What's the best way to deal with rabbits?

A Ideally, fence rabbits out of your garden. Use 31mm hexagonal mesh netting, at least 1.2m high. This should stop most rabbits from entering your garden. However, for total exclusion go for 1.5m high netting. Bury at least the bottom 15cm of mesh, angling it outwards

to deter rabbits from digging underneath it. If burying isn't practical, just lie the lower 30cm on the soil surface and weight it down until the vegetation has grown through it and will hold it in place. You can either attach this mesh to an existing fence or put up a new fence using stakes every 5m and running a straining wire along the top to support the wire mesh. Often a temporary barrier is all that's needed while new plants get established. For this, a lower fence just 0.6m high is sufficient. Although rabbits can push under this, they seldom do. When the plants are big enough to cope with a little damage, remove the fence. Portable electric fencing against rabbits is used by farmers, with success. However, it needs a battery or transformer, lots of upkeep and gets in the way, as well as being a hazard to pets and children. If you think it could help you, contact your local agricultural merchants.

Q How should I protect trees?

A Opt for tree guards where you cannot fence the whole plot. Use a 0.6m tree guard, unless deer are expected too, in which case a 1.5m tree guard will be needed. Get tree guards from your local agricultural merchants (see Yellow Pages), or LBS Garden Warehouse 01282 873370 for a mail-order supplier.

Q Can't I leave it all to nature?

A Although foxes, buzzards, weasels, stoats and badgers take many rabbits, they won't protect your garden completely.

Q Are my neighbours obliged to do anything about rabbits on their property?

A In theory, yes. There is legislation that makes land owners responsible for rabbit control. But in practice, it does not seem to be very useful.

Q Where can I get professional help?

A Professional pest-control firms will provide a clearance service - at a price. Look in Yellow Pages under 'pest and vermin'. To find a reliable operator, ask your local authority if they can recommend one, or look for one who is a member of the British Pest Control Association.

Q Are there any plants that rabbits won't touch?

A No plant can be said to be rabbit-proof - rabbits eat virtually anything, and most plants are vulnerable when young. However, there do seem to be some plants which rabbits avoid, and we have drawn on several sources to provide the suggestions listed here.

Shrubs

Aucuba japonica, berberis, buxus, *Choisya ternata*, cornus, cotoneaster, daphne, elaeagnus, fuchsia, gaultheria, *Hippophaë rhamnoides*, hypericum, ilex, olearia, rhododendron, rhus, rosa, rosemary, ruscus, sambucus, symphoricarpos, taxus, viburnum and yucca.

Perennials and bulbs

Acanthus, aconitum, anemone, colchicum, convallaria, cortaderia, daffodils, fargesia and other bamboos, digitalis, eryngium, euphorbia, geranium, helleborus, hyacinth, irises, ligularia, lupin, osteospermum, peonies, poppies, sedum, snowdrops and Solomon's seal.

Vegetables

Broad beans, potato, celery, tomato and parsnips.

Useful contacts

RSPCA 0870 33 35 999
Defra 08459 33 55 77
British Pest Control Association
0870 609 2687