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Critter Control

Most people enjoy nature and delight in watching our woodland friends as they play and meander about, but when nature collides with our gardens, battle lines are often drawn. Animals obviously don't appreciate the difference between our gardens and their next meal. As our cities and suburbs continue to grow, we can only put the blame on ourselves. What we need to do is find a way to mutually coexist with our newly acquired neighbors.

If your gardens are starting to look like a war zone, don't fret. There are lots of ways to deter these unwanted guests without eliminating them. The trick is finding out which ones work for you, and this takes experimentation.

Animals are actually picky about what they like to eat. Therefore, choose plants that are less favorable to their palates. These plants are normally listed as resistant varieties, such as deer or rabbit resistant. Some deer resistant plants include bleeding hearts, Joe Pye weed and coral bells. Some rabbit resistant varieties include yarrow, lupines and astilbe. Check with your local garden center for a more comprehensive list.

Not only are animals picky eaters, they are also advantageous creatures. This means they don't like to work any harder than they have to to find food. The harder you make them work for their food, the less likely they will hang around. This is where the use of fencing or barriers comes into play. This is a very reliable way of control, but it can also be unsightly and impractical. Fencing can take away from the natural beauty of your gardens and make cultivation and harvesting difficult as well. When all else fails, this may be your only option.

When food supplies become scarce for our woodland friends, that's when things get tougher. When animals are desperate, they will do whatever is necessary to survive. This means chewing on your resistant plants and climbing your fences as well. If you find yourself in this situation, your only option may be supplemental feeding. If you can't beat them, feed them. Plant a patch of lettuce or beans far away from your other gardens for the deer and rabbits. In the winter, vegetable scraps from your kitchen placed away from your desirable plants will keep them occupied. We feed and enjoy the birds, why not our furry friends? Don't place out large quantities of food at a time though or it will work as an attractant.

Another way to combat hungry or nosey critters is to use deterrents. These can be natural or man-made. Natural deterrents blend into your landscape, where man-made ones can be distracting or unpleasant to look at.

Natural deterrents are those things that occur naturally in the environment to repel unwanted critters. Smell is one thing that animals rely heavily upon and creating certain odors in your gardens can help repel them. For example: Rabbits can't stand the smell of rotten hay. Use it as a mulch or under existing mulch. Deer are really sensitive to unnatural smells so try planting strong smelling herbs in with your desirable plants. Deer also hate sunflowers; try planting a few of these around your garden. Dried blood or blood meal also works well as a deterrent, plus it adds nitrogen to your soil, helping fertilize your plants. Squirrels hate the smell of onions; try grating onions around areas where they are a problem – works great in tulip beds. The trick to using odor repellents is to alternate scents

so the critters don't get familiar with them. Taste is another natural deterrent. If things don't taste natural or are unappealing, odds are critters will leave your plants alone. This is where garlic or hot pepper spray can be used.

Man-made deterrents also work well but can be intrusive or unappealing. Hanging shiny objects like foil pie tins or old cd's works well. Sachets of dog hair or bars of soap can be hung on or around your plants. Sections of hose or rope can be placed around to imitate snakes. Windmills and scarecrows are often used. Again, the trick is to move things around to keep critters on their toes.

Clever gardeners have devised all sorts of ways to discourage, trick and repel unwanted critters. Remember, not all methods will work the same for everyone or every situation. If at first you don't succeed, try another technique. Check with the experts at your local garden center. They probably have a few tricks of their own.

Happy Gardening!