



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

And you think you've got trouble!

We all know that in Sisters Country it's tough to grow veggies outdoors. Corn is almost impossible, fruit trees often bloom beautifully in spring, only to be frozen out the next day (like my crab apples!)

To circumvent this common problem, my son Caleb built me and Sue a very beautiful greenhouse out of sandbags, lumber and greenhouse Solexx facing the sun. For several years we've enjoyed tomatoes, squash, peppers and cucumbers with only the pestiferous aphids to battle. By using clever placement of blankets and space heater we can keep the greenhouse going into December and January most winters.

Oh, those little mouth-watering sungold tomatoes, the huge deee-licious beefsteaks and about six other good to perfect tomatoes Sue raised. How I wished we could keep them going through winter, but when the temperature went to zero we'd throw in the towel and

call it quits.

It was a very sad day when we cut off the heat and water and let our tomato plants turn to ice... I saved as many of the young sungold tomatoes as possible to ripen, and when they were gone I'd really get the winter blues.

That's the way it went, year after year — until this year. Then something moved into our greenhouse that just loved to commit mayhem! It didn't eat hardly anything — it just went on night after night destroying tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and our milkweed starts.

Every morning we'd go out and find another tomato plant chewed off at the surface, lovely, green and healthy pepper plant leaves lying about, and felled milkweed.

Whatever it was it didn't touch all the quaking aspen invading the greenhouse, oh, no it just killed my sungold tomatoes, left and right. I'm usually at peace with Mother Nature (all except her big, slobbering mule deer that hop over Sue's seven-foot fence to eat her beautiful strawberry plants) and now this "creature" who has moved into our greenhouse, bent on destroying everything Sue is trying to grow.

It wasn't mice. I tried my small Victor snap traps on them and came up with nothing. (Using peanut butter as bait, they never fail.) It wasn't gophers, we looked for their sign in all the raised beds and not a piece of soil was moved there.

I suspected the California ground squirrel who has taken up residence under one of my shops, but they're diurnal, and the critter who was doing in our tomato plants was nocturnal. By the size and shape of the dropping left behind I suspected a packrat, so I went to work again with two of those big Victor rat traps.

Now, Good People, I DO NOT like to kill anything. But I do snap-trap mice. The Hopi People have a saying that I firmly agree with: "Never allow mice to live in your house, they will steal the breath of your children." That's one of the symptoms of the hantavirus, and no one wants that in their house!

Besides, the dead mice are going to a good cause. Marley, a great horned educational raptor that rehabber Gary Landers watches over, loves fresh-caught house mice.

The various chipmunks around my place are all harmless and have never moved into the greenhouse, so they're left alone. The big California ground squirrel and bushy-tailed packrats have to move on because they — like our Belding ground squirrels and golden mantels — are known carriers of the bubonic plague.

I feared we had a packrat coming into the greenhouse, but not knowing much about their preferences for food, I wasn't too sure. However, Sue has a lot of money and TLC wrapped up in our greenhouse plants, and the infernal killing was going on

every night. Soooo....

I put out the big Victor rat traps and started with peanut butter bait. That didn't work, so I went to baiting with organic wheat chips, then went to good old Lay's potato chips and finally to cheeses of all kinds. Nothing I set out was the right bait — until I used boiled left-over brussels sprouts garnished with butter. That was it!

The beast swiped it from one of my live traps. "Ah, ha," says I and moved the smaller live trap into the cupboard and placed a delicious butter-soaked (just the way I like 'em) brussels sprout on top of the treadle.

"Jim!" Sue announced

the next morning. "We got him!" When she brought in the live trap, there was that beautiful whisker-twitching, bushy-tailed packrat with tomato juice on his breath.

Yes, it's still alive as far as I know. I took it far from any structures to one of BLM's wildlife corridors and turned it loose. If it can find its way back it'll take a long time, and I'll know who it is with that dab of red marker ink I put on his tail.

So, if you suddenly have a packrat turn up with a dab of red on its tail, boil up a few brussels sprouts, lay some butter on 'em and call me, I'll loan you my live-trap.



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Double trouble on four legs, the bushy-tailed packrat.

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