

Diggin' in the Dirt: Keeping Pests Out

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Things that go bump in the night

Houses can be very friendly places for wildlife. Squirrels, skunks, opossums, raccoons, rats, mice, birds, and bats are relatively common tenants in our dwellings.

They are attracted by food and/or shelter. Whenever I get a call about rats, raccoons, or opossums, my first question is about feeding pets “free-choice” outside. Invariably, that has been the practice. Bird feeding can encourage chipmunks, squirrels, rats and mice as well. Naturally, the first line of defense is to remove the food. As one might expect, this can be highly irritating for the animals. It is not uncommon for squirrels and raccoons to get rather testy and scold the humans they meet. Rats become a lot more visible as they are forced to make a more energetic search for food.

Sometimes, removing food leads to their voluntary relocation. However, most of the time, they will stick with the familiar territory to bed down and simply travel a little bit further to find dinner. Sometimes food removal needs to be a neighborhood effort. This is especially true in cities but rural towns are not immune to “community raised” rats.

If you plan to trap any of the critters, this is a teachable moment. Their need for food is higher than their caution, until they see some of the clan trapped. Live traps can be used for raccoons and opossums but typically only capture one of the troupe. They usually are not a great solution and there are legal restrictions about their release. Call or email me for details.

Kill traps are excellent for mice (who never seem to figure out traps) but need careful management for rats to be effective. They are generally ineffective for squirrels. Baits have their place but can lead to serious non-target injury and/or the smell of a dead rat or two in the wall void. Not at all pleasant. Contact me for advice on baits.

So what can you do? First,

find out where they are getting in. Look for gaps in the foundation, particularly around vent openings. Close up all but one opening after you’ve removed the feed. They may leave on their own. Ammonia soaked rags or mothballs under decks have proven effective for many people in getting animals to leave. Under foundations, there would be concerns with the ammonia or mothball



chemicals entering your living space. Some people have used one way doors to allow large animals to leave but not return. But that poses the risk of a clutch of young ones being left behind to die and decay.

When you have finally removed the animals from your house, tighten it up. Crawl under your house and look for light coming through places without screening. Often these gaps are missed in an outside inspection. Fix them with steel wool or something similar. An ounce of prevention... well, you know the rest.

Organic insecticides

We have had an early aphid season and seemingly high numbers of flea beetles damaging seedlings. There may be times when you might want to use an organically certified insecticide to manage certain pests. Here is a summary of the strengths (and weaknesses) of the currently available organic insecticides:

Neem/azadirachtin: Feeding deterrent and repellent. Slows insect molting. Fair on beetles. Weak on aphids. Mixed on caterpillars.

Pyrethrum: Quick knockdown, little residual. Good on aphids/whiteflies, thrips, and beetles. Mixed on caterpillars.

lars.

Bacillus thuringiensis (Btk): A bacterial derived toxicant for use on caterpillars. Btk is very effective if reapplied often and coverage is good. Bti works on mosquito and fungus gnat larva and there is another Bt active on several beetles.

Spinosad: Newer product from a fungal fermentation. Very good on caterpillars and thrips. Pretty good on beetles. Fair on aphids. Better residual activity than most organic products. Has been rapidly adopted by commercial organic growers. Several trade names including Monterey Garden Insecticide and Captain Jack’s Dead Bug Brew.

Soaps and horticultural oils: Good on soft-bodied insects if directly sprayed. Good on thrips and mites. Can damage plants so read labels. Short-lived.

Essential oils: These work a bit like the soaps and also act as feeding deterrents. Good mite and aphid activity. Rosemary and citrus based products are available. Also some plant damage potential. Short-lived.

Check the labels of the products you are considering to find out what is in it (in the active ingredient portion of the label) and for information on how and what it can be used on. **Reading and following label instructions is im-**

portant in the safe use of any pesticide, organic or conventional.

The OSU Extension office is starting to re-open for face-to-face public contact. Appointments are still needed. The best way to reach me directly is with the email below.

Free newsletter (what a deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called *Country Living*) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

Contact information

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