

Pest Busters #11 –Voles

I've been battling voles for years, ever since we moved into our home in 2001. When I am vigilant about controlling them, I can usually keep the vole damage to a minimum, but every few years it seems like their population explodes and I need to rethink my tactics. Following are tips that have worked for me.

If you don't know what a vole is, it's a mouse-like creature that likes to burrow just under the soil to make its home. They aren't good climbers, so you don't usually have to worry about them getting in the house, but they love to nest in areas with lots of leaf litter or in tall weeds and grasses. They use the vegetation to help cover the entrances to their runs which are about 1-1/2" to 2" in diameter. In the spring, you can usually see lots of evidence of voles as their runs are near the top of the soil, especially if you have a lot of snow cover in the winter.

There are about 70 species of voles, and the majority eat plants, especially the roots and tender shoots of smaller plants. That is where most of my damage has occurred. I buy a lot of small plants and grow them in pots for a couple of years before planting them in my garden.

The easiest way for me to avoid vole damage is to repel them. They don't like the scent of castor oil, so I have great luck with a product called Molemax that repels not only voles, but gophers, skunks, squirrels and other burrowing animals. I sprinkle it all along the area I want to protect, water it in, and watch it work. This works very well starting in spring, right thru the autumn months. Once it begins to snow, I can't reapply, but by then, the voles have generally left the area, providing I have been diligent about putting down the MoleMax all season long.

Another great repellent is powdered fox or bobcat urine. Fox and bobcat are predators to voles, so the voles will stay clear of an area that appears to have a fox or bobcat in residence. I find using the powdered urine around the perimeter of our property and using the MoleMax in the garden areas is pretty affective.

To protect any bulbs I plant, I soak them in Ropel Animal Repellent. This has worked amazingly well, and not even a squirrel wants to dig up my bulbs. Ropel is a very nasty tasting liquid, so make sure you wear rubber gloves when using it and handling any treated bulbs as it takes a while to get the taste off your skin. Just soak the bulbs for one minute, let them dry, and then plant as usual. It's not safe for food crops, so keep that in mind.

When populations of voles are high, you may have no choice but to protect your prized plants with wire mesh. Some people like to create a box out of this mesh and plant the root ball of the plant inside the box. This can work well for small bulbs also. The squares in the mesh would need to be a 1/4", or voles can still get inside the box you've made. I find that this method can hinder the growth of certain kinds of plants, so you need to be careful what type of plant you put inside the mesh. Make sure the stems of the plant can grow out of the holes on the mesh and if the root ball gets large, make the box larger than the root ball you are planting. An alternate solution would be to fence the

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area you want to protect with ¼” mesh making sure the mesh goes down below the ground at least 6”, and remains above ground 6”-12” based on how much snowfall you get in the winter.

By accident, I discovered that my garden bed with a rock border is protected by the voles. The rocks sit in a trench that goes around the border, so part of the rock is below the soil surface. Grass is kept very short next to the rocks, so they have no places to hide. My guess is that when they are digging their tunnels, they hit a rock and go in another direction.

Because I like to use organic mulches on my garden to add nutrients to the soil, the levels can quickly pile up if I’m not paying attention. Don’t use more than 2”-3” of mulch on any garden bed and frequently fluff the mulch with a fork or rake to discourage them from nesting in it. Once a week should be sufficient if you have high activity, less often if voles are not much of a problem. Fluffing the mulch also keeps it from compacting which can reduce water from getting to the roots below, so it’s a good idea to do that anyway. You will also want to keep mulch away from crowns of plants where rodents can hide and dine undetected.

In winter, voles have been known to eat the bark from young trees, so it’s important to protect them with a tree wrap of some kind. Just make sure you remove the wrap in the spring so that it doesn’t inhibit the growth of the tree.

You can also trap voles to help reduce their populations quickly, but this can be harder than it sounds. A standard mouse trap, baited with peanut butter should be placed at the entrance of their runs. I’ve found that using live traps like the TomKat works better, but they are still alive once in the trap, so you have to go to the trouble of killing them after you’ve caught them, not something I particularly like doing myself. Choose pleasant days during October or November to bait your traps when they are more likely to be active. Once you’ve trapped in one area, destroy the burrows to discourage new voles from moving in.

If you garden for wildlife, you may find that your population is well controlled by nature. Hawks, owls, skunks, fox, and snakes will all eat voles. Mother Nature can usually take care of herself without our involvement, but if she needs a little help, choose the least offensive method of control first and go from there. I’ve never had a problem with voles damaged an established plant planted in the garden, it’s the potted ones that are still young that are the most vulnerable.

More information on voles can be found here

<http://icwdm.org/handbook/rodents/Voles.asp> and here

<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/pages/publicationD.jsp?publicationId=100>.