

Garden Column for the Salisbury Post

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A distraught lady called about her hostas disappearing before her eyes. The plants were being pulled through the ground one by one. Her hostas and other plants were being killed by something gnawing them at ground level.

This was classic vole damage.

Voles are small tailless mice that spend much of their lives underground. These animals can be a gardener's nightmare because they feed plant roots and stems, especially the roots of flower bulbs, ornamental shrubs and fruit trees. Voles chew on the trunks desirable shrubs and apple trees near the base weakens often killing the plant.

Many confuse voles with moles. Moles tunnel underground in search of grubs and other insects. Moles feed exclusively on grubs and other small insects. Voles are vegetarians. Voles will often use mole tunnels as a highway to your plants.

Voles tend to be a problem when residential homes are located near hardwood forests or brushy fields. Wooded subdivisions tend to have high vole populations. This pesky animal can devastate ornamental plantings. Dwarf nandinas, hostas, daylilies, tulip bulbs, apple trees and rhododendron are preferred dining plants for voles.

If you suspect voles, check for chisel-like marks near or below ground parts of the plants. Another way to check for voles is to place a piece of apple under a flowerpot. Check the apple the next day for gnawing.

There are few practical ways to control voles. Voles can be trapped with apple-baited mousetraps placed under the cover of flowerpots, or other overhead cover that blocks out all light. Look for the tunnels or runs under the mulch, and place traps cross-wise to the direction of the runways. Locate traps on a 10-foot by 10-foot grid in the landscape. Continue to check traps at least once a week after the last vole is caught. A few years ago a lady in Salisbury trapped 20 voles in two days! An alternative control is to use a rodenticide such as Rozol. Apply the rodenticide according to the label directions in covered locations in the runways or holes 10-feet apart. Re-bait entrance holes every 21 to 30 days. Repeat the test with the piece of apple to make sure you've rid your garden or landscape of the pest. The apple test is foolproof way to determine if you have a vole infestation.

Another way to prevent vole damage is to use a physical barrier. Hardware cloth or wire mesh is often used to protect bulbs and shrubs. Another method is to incorporate Permatil as a physical barrier for bulbs and other valuable plants. Permatil is a soil amendment used to soften clay soils. The company claims the sharp edges of the expanded slate wards off the digging animal protecting bulbs and other plant materials in the landscape.