

P-Patch Community Gardening Program

Rodents in the Garden

Tip

PP403

7/25/17

P-Patch TIPS are reference documents that address topics related to the development and ongoing management of P-Patch Community Gardens.

Rodents

As organic gardeners we are always working toward finding a balance between our needs while sharing the garden with other living organisms that may hinder our ability to get what we want. We are always striving for a balance that works with nature and at the same time, see our role in creating conditions that can contribute to the thriving of all species.

P-Patches are organic and thus use organic methods to control pests. In rare cases, when impact is so great and all organic methods have been exhausted, P-Patch staff have worked with gardens on non-organic methods for the short term. ***This should only be done a last resort.***

Step one. Educate yourself about the type of rat that is in your garden.

Step two. Assess the situation and decide if it is a garden wide problem.

Step three. Eliminate rodent habitats and stop practices that encourage the rodents
Keep in mind that rodent and human conflict can only be controlled, not eliminated.

Rats and Mice

Washington is home to both native and non-native rats. The non-native Norway rat (*Rattus Norvegicus*) are those that are most common in the garden. Norways nest underground, in rock walls, wood piles and in garden sheds.

Roof rats (*Rattus rattus*) nest above ground, trees, brambles and ivy. **Rodents require:** food, water, cover, habitat or living space and are nocturnal, shy creatures and don't like disturbance, noise or changes in the physical environment.

Controls

Food

- **Don't feed:** Don't feed birds or squirrels; rats eat the same food.
- **Harvest:** Don't leave ripe produce on the vines and remove any that have fallen immediately.
- **Stake up:** Raise plants off the ground.

Water

- Remove or cover open containers of water; it will also minimize mosquitoes.

Cover

- Clean up protected pathways that rats need. Lumber stored alongside wood garden beds, weedy areas between fences and compost bin provide great cover.
- Remove plants growing up against the shed and store. Lumber, garden stakes,
- Wood piles at least 12 inches above ground.

Habitat-Rodent Proof Planted Areas

- **Minimize densely planted areas:** Individual plot holders will need to reconsider their garden and adjust for the benefit of whole. Weeds between rows and particularly along fence lines make good cover. Fill in burrows and mark. Mulch should not exceed 3" deep.
- **Locate problem areas:** Some areas are going to be more problematic than others.



Norway Rat

Controls *(continued)*

Cultivate your garden carefully: Remove Habitat

- **Compost & debris piles:** Composting in an organic garden is too important to eliminate. Be an active composter. Site the bin 2' away from walls, fences, hedges and anywhere that can be a sheltered 'runway'. Design bins to be rodent proof (line bins with 1/4", 16-20 gauge, galvanized hardware cloth. Compost piles should be spread or managed for rapid decomposition. Keep compost piles wet. Don't add any cooked or processed food waste, meat, fish or dairy products.
- **Rodent proof storage boxes, buildings:** Store all fertilizers and seeds in metal rat proof containers, repair any cracks or small holes in the foundations, repair broken windows and doors, and seal any holes.

Direct Control methods

Traps will not work unless food sources and nesting possibilities are first removed.

Snap traps are recommended and should be placed in areas that are frequented by rodents.

Set, visit, and bait traps regularly. Traps should be placed in a box made to keep birds out. An effective method of baiting snap traps is to bind a small wad of gauze into the trigger with thread and then work peanut butter into the gauze until saturated. The gauze acts to entangle the rodent's teeth so they can't escape before tripping the trap mechanism. Set the trap AFTER you place the bait on the trigger! Traps should be tied down or anchored in some way, as rats may drag the trap away if they are only partially caught.

Water traps or drowning rodents is another method. Some gardens have successfully used drowning traps to bring down rodent populations. Most of these traps are made from easy and cheap materials. A quick search of the internet brings up many examples.

Location and number of traps: The number of traps will depend on the extent of the problem. It is best to place traps close to each other (no more than 20 feet between traps). Be aware, that older rats MAY avoid a newly placed trap for over a week, you may want to leave traps in place for two weeks before trying another place.

Success is enhanced by placing traps with the trigger-end against walls where the rodents like to run. This allows the pests to run across the trigger from both directions. Traps can be reused without special cleaning.

Dead rats should be placed in a plastic bag and placed in the trash and remember to take proper sanitary precautions

Other Options

Dogs and cats—some gardens have effectively used rat terriers on a periodic basis to flush out primary locations of rats and even eliminate some rats. Some gardens also have resident neighbor cats that visit the garden and help keep rodent populations down.

The P-Patch Community Gardening Program does not recommend the use of poison baits.

Plan of Action

- Communicate and decide as a group.
- Identify the problem: **Mark locations of rat sightings.** These areas can be identified by looking for gnaw marks, rodent tracks, droppings, urine stains, undisturbed areas, or burrows.
 1. How big is the problem?
 2. Is the problem bigger in some areas of the garden?
 3. How seasonal is the problem?
 4. What organic strategies will be put into place?
 5. How will we communicate with all gardeners?
 6. When will we reassess the problem?
 7. Do we need to ask for extra help?
- Everyone should participate in the solutions
- Reevaluate degree of conflict regularly

Additional Resources

Credit: *Living with Wildlife: WA Department of Fish & Wildlife-Species Fact Sheets* (<http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/species>)



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