

RABBITS

Rabbits in the Vegetable Garden
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Species:

Cottontail Rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

Damage

Cottontail rabbits can cause heavy damage to flower and vegetable gardens in the spring and summer. They will devour a wide range of flowers and vegetable crops, and will easily prune an entire row of peas, beans, carrots, and beets. A few crops, such as corn, cucumbers, peppers, potatoes, squash, and tomatoes are seldom attacked by rabbits.

Description

The cottontail rabbit is the common rabbit found throughout New Jersey. Cottontails are gray or brownish gray, approximately 15 to 20 inches long and they weigh 2 to 4 pounds. They have large ears, large hind feet and the tail is short and white on the underside, resembling a cotton ball (hence the name "cottontail").

Life History

Rabbits tend to concentrate in a favorable habitat, such as a brushy area, field edge, brush piles, or under junk piles or other sheltered areas. Rabbits usually stay within one area, but will relocate if there is a lack of food. In suburban areas, "empty" habitats are quickly filled by new rabbits, however.

Rabbits remain active all year, feeding on flowers and vegetables in the spring and summer and on shrubs and trees in the fall and winter. They use natural holes or burrows made by other animals, and occasionally underground dens during extreme weather conditions or to escape enemies. Their young are born naked and blind in a shallow nest dug into the ground,

and remain in the nest for several weeks. There are two to three litters per year; the first are born in early spring. Each pair of rabbits has the potential of producing up to 18 young during the breeding season.

Control

Because of the rabbit's reproductive potential, no lethal control (poisoning) is effective for more than a short time. The most effective control measures include habitat modification and exclusion techniques.

1. Fences of wire mesh (chicken wire) or plastic sheeting effectively protect the garden when plants are most susceptible to damage. The fence should be 2 feet high and secured tight to the ground, or buried a few inches. If wire mesh is used, it should be 1 inch or smaller to keep out young rabbits
2. Small mesh hardware cloth can be used as a cylindrical wrap around young trees or plants. Make sure that the cylinder stands far enough away from the wood so rabbits cannot eat through the holes. Wraps of burlap or tar paper will protect tree trunks, also. Garden supply centers offer several commercial tree wraps.
3. Clean out wood piles, tall grass, brush piles, stone piles, weed patches, and other areas that offer cover and nesting sites. In suburban areas, this is an effective control method because few areas of suitable habitat are available, and the rabbits are forced to relocate.
4. The only rabbit repellent registered for actively growing food crops is ammonium hydroxide (Hinder*). This material can be applied to all vegetation within the garden and to vegetation in a border strip around the garden. Hinder must be reapplied after a rain and at 1- to 2-week intervals when plants are growing.

5. For nonedible vegetation (flowers and ornamentals), a 10 to 20 percent solution of Thiram applied with a resin sticker is effective in repelling rabbits. Consult label for complete directions and restrictions. Remember: Most repellents are toxic and require safe storage and use.

6. Naphthalene mothballs or dried blood meal placed among the plants sometimes keep rabbits from damaging flower or garden plots. Blood meal does not weather, however, and should be reapplied after rain. To improve repellency, sprinkle on plants when dew is present so it sticks to plants. Hot sauce materials are generally ineffective.

7. No toxicants or fumigants are labeled for rabbit control, and poisoning rabbits is NOT recommended.

8. Several excellent commercial types of live traps are available from garden centers and can be reused for many years. Place traps where you know rabbits feed or rest, near cover, and place a canvas or other dark material over it. In winter, face traps downwind to keep snow and leaves from plugging the entrance. During cold weather, use corn cobs, dried apples, dried alfalfa, or clover as baits. In warm weather, apple, carrot, and cabbage are effective (cabbage leaves can be rolled and placed in the trap). Release trapped rabbits in a rural area several miles from where you trap them.

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Check with your local and state wildlife agencies for regulations.

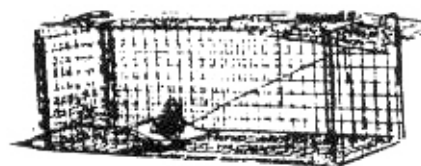
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