

Bunny Invasion

By Susan Camp

When we left for our month-long trip in mid-April, the pink creeping phlox blossoms in one of the borders were opening and the leaves were green and healthy. When we returned, I didn't pay attention to the phlox border for a few weeks. One morning I noticed that not only were the blossoms gone, but so were most of the leaves. I soon discovered that the stems had been nipped off sharply. Full realization of the cause came when I found piles of bean-shaped, brown bunny fertilizer around the plants. We had a hungry rabbit.

Bunnies are cute; no one can dispute that. With their plushy bodies, wiggly noses and silky ears, powder puff tails and endearingly goofy faces, you just want to pick them up and hug them. Until they get into your garden; then you want them to go away.

The Internet Center for Wildlife Information publication "Cottontail Rabbits" contains detailed information on wild rabbits.

Of the nine species of cottontail rabbits found in North America and Mexico, the eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) is the one most commonly seen in the eastern and midwestern United States. The gray or brownish-gray adult cottontail weighs 2 to 4 pounds and is about 18 inches long. Lifespan is 12 to 15 months. A cottontail spends its entire life in a 10-acre area, usually in field edges, brush piles, hedgerows, or gardens. Unlike their English cousins, American cottontails don't dig burrows, although they may use dens abandoned by groundhogs or other mammals.

Eastern cottontails live to eat and avoid being eaten, and to reproduce. In warm climates, a female cottontail can produce up to six litters of two to three kits (baby rabbits) in one year. Many rabbits are eaten by hawks, eagles, and larger mammals. Feral cats and housecats allowed to roam outdoors will kill and eat rabbits. Other cottontails get hit by cars.

The ones that survive likely will find their way into your vegetable and flower gardens. Rabbits are voracious eaters and the list of their favorite foods is so long that one author noted it is easier to list the foods they don't like!

Rabbits demonstrate seasonal food preferences. Tulips are a favorite springtime snack, along with the delicate shoots of perennials like my low-growing phlox. Cottontails will mow down herbs, pea, bean and beet plants. They avoid potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and cucumbers. In winter, rabbits will strip bark from blackberry and raspberry canes, apple trees, and evergreen, shade, and ornamental trees.

The best method of control is prevention. Like Mr. McGregor in Beatrix Potter's story, we have a fence that permits our Peter Rabbit to move in and out. A two-foot chicken wire fence with one-inch mesh, buried 6 inches deep, will deter a bunny visitor. Place hardware cloth cylinders around tree trunks to protect the bark.

Rabbits are repelled by strong odors, so commercial compounds containing rotten eggs (sulfur), dried blood, and garlic may work against rabbits. A home-brewed concoction of onions, garlic,

and hot peppers, diluted in a gallon of water and sprayed onto plants was suggested by one writer. Other rabbit deterrents include dusting leaves with talcum powder or powdered cayenne pepper.

Trapping is another option, and several websites contain instructions for rabbit boxes baited with vegetables, but a trap with one piece of carrot might not be as enticing as a whole row of fresh vegetables and greens.

Dogs love to chase rabbits. If you don't have a dog, consider borrowing a neighbor's pooch for a morning or evening, when rabbits tend to feed.

According to folklore, rabbits are said to be frightened their own reflections, and will flee from large glass jars filled with water placed throughout the garden.

We haven't yet seen our bunny visitor, so he may dine when we are away or he might be staying cool under the baptisia. I sprinkled commercial repellent around the phlox and they are greening up. If he returns, he had better watch out. I have been saving glass jars.

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