

The Grapevine

Getting the Munchies

Growing up I loved going out to the barn to feed the chickens and horses. I loved the smells of the feed and hay in the barn along with spending time with the animals. There for awhile I had one friendly little mouse that would wait for me twice a day to give it some food or rescue it from the feed bin when the grain level was too low for it to jump out. As you can guess my parents were not fond of my little friend and as I've gotten older I can understand their point. My cute little mouse and his friends were responsible for some pretty serious damage to my parent's landscape plants (along with the diseases that they can carry). This fall has been mild so far, but as the temperatures drop or we start getting snow mice and other critters can wreck some damage to our landscape plants this winter.



It wasn't till one winter in North Dakota that I saw the true extent of the damage that mice, voles and other rodents can cause in a landscape. That particular winter we had a mild fall, then a series of blizzards dumped 70+ inches of snow in a month, on top of ground that never actually froze for the winter. The small furry critters tunneled at ground level and unfortunately chewed completely around the trunks of many small trees in one yard leading to the eventual death of a large portion of their trees. They never worried about protecting their trees since they hadn't had issues in the past which had some sad and expensive consequences. With these last few warm days of fall let's try not to make that same mistake.

There are a few steps now we should take to keep mice from becoming an issue this winter. The first step is to remove stacks of lumber, woodpiles, brush, etc that rodents could hide in to help reduce their living options. Mice won't travel long distances, especially without cover, so removing the hiding places will reduce the chances you have issues. I would also recommend keeping mulch away from the trunks of trees to keep mice from having another hiding place. If you want to mulch around sensitive plants there are options to keep those plants safe. You can put a physical barrier around tree trunks or other plants to serve as protection. The plastic tree tubes, tree wrap or chicken wire can keep small critters away from your plants. If we have a heavy snowfall or enough snow this winter where the snow might be taller than your physical barrier I would recommend going out and making your barrier taller.

Chemical repellants can also be an option if a physical barrier isn't a possibility. They make repellants for both rodents and deer that work either by taste or smell. We know deer can cause quite a bit of damage to smaller trees so a repellant can be a great option to keep those plants safe. Chemical taste repellents work by making the bark taste bad so that animals looking for an easy meal look elsewhere. Apply any taste repellent from the soil to well past the usual snow level. Spray the trunk and low-hanging branches that rabbits might be able to reach. If snow drifts unusually high around valuable plants, a midwinter spray might be necessary to extend protection higher up the plants. Taste repellents can be fairly effective if animals have other food sources available nearby. Smell repellants are the other option can be effective and work via a smell that the animals don't like such as blood meal or predator urine. Repellents can be a good option, but if animal populations are so high, the weather so severe or food so scarce that the animals are nearing starvation, they will ignore even the best repellant to get to food to eat.



While I love most furry creatures and would happily have some as pets, I don't want to provide them a meal with the landscape plants around my house. This winter I'm going to work to keep them from using my garden as a feeding ground till spring. Luckily living in town, I won't have issues like my parents who live but I would still rather be safe than sorry.

Reminders:

Start your Amaryllis now to have them bloom for Christmas. For more information on that follow this link: <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/news/stories/2021/11/horticulture-amaryllis.html>

Winterize your strawberries with mulch after Thanksgiving to help protect them from cold temperatures and prevent them from being heaved out of the ground by freeze and thaw cycles.