

Protect Your Garden From Voles

As you walk around your garden on a beautiful Spring day, you notice that the leaves on one of your plants are drooping. You see a small “quarter” size hole around the root system. In addition, the normally solid ground beneath your feet feels slightly soft, and you look down and see a small burrow leading up to the plant. Upon closer inspection you notice gnaw marks around the plants in an irregular pattern. If this story sounds familiar, you may very well have a vole problem

Voles are small rodent mammals that feed on plant roots, stems, leaves, seeds, grass and other vegetation. They look similar to field mice and can vary in color and shade. Often brown, gray, or black, voles can grow to lengths of 5-8” from head to tail. They are common in areas of dense vegetation and are active throughout the year. Furthermore, they reproduce often and continuously throughout the year and can maintain high population levels under good conditions.

Now that you know what a vole is and how to identify them, the next question is what can be done to prevent them? There are three primary solutions for voles: traps, poisons, and barriers. Each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Most traps are costly, difficult to set up, and time consuming. These are three characteristics homeowners generally want to avoid. While ordinary mousetraps are less labor intensive, concern with the handling and disposing of dead rodents and traps makes this an unattractive option to many gardeners. (When handling dead rodents and traps, it’s very important to wear disposable gloves and to wash your hands well afterwards as they could be possible carriers of disease.)

While certain poisons can be effective, the potential harm to non-target species, such as pets or children, is very high unless they are used with extreme caution. For this reason, they are generally not recommended for homeowner use. In fact, many rodenticides, such as zinc phosphide, are only available to certified pest control applicators. Repellents also exist but are often ineffective and require frequent applications after rainfall or for new growth.

Wire or metal barriers can be used to protect seedlings and young trees from voles, but they are less effective against pine voles, which can tunnel under the ground. The best solution is to place a ceramic material such as Espoma Soil Perfector in the ground around the plant. Because voles are naturally disinclined to dig into abrasive materials, this simple application will provide a physical barrier for your plant’s roots. Soil Perfector is non-toxic and will not physically harm the voles. Furthermore, Soil Perfector will not break down or degrade in the soil so one application is all you ever need. While the voles will live to see another day, hopefully they will head over to your neighbor for their next meal.

For more information on voles and Soil Perfector, visit Espoma’s website at www.espoma.com