



The temperatures this year have been a rollercoaster. In a matter of a few weeks, we went from subzero temperatures to higher-than-average temperatures. That type of temperature fluctuation is not only hard on us; it is also hard on our landscapes and those that live in it.

While the snow was on the ground, pesky critters were at work. Rabbits have been hard at work munching on your landscape plants during the winter. Rabbits will feed on pencil sized branches and will leave a clean 45-degree angle cut. They can also strip the bark from around the base of trees and shrubs as high as 3 feet tall. Cottontails may be cute, but if there is heavy enough feeding, they can cause some serious damage. Fencing the plants that are the most munched by rabbits will keep them from becoming lunch. Be sure to bury the fence at least 1 foot in the ground and have it stand at least 2 feet tall to help prevent feeding damage.

Oh deer. These 'large rabbits' also feed on vegetation. Compared to rabbit damage, deer browsing results in torn or jagged edges of twigs. Deer damage can occur from ground height up to 6 feet tall. Deer can also cause other damage to plant material in the landscape. Male deer antlers develop with a velvet-like coating that must be rubbed off before fall. 'Buck rub' damage is common on smaller diameter trees. The rubbing of the deer's antlers against the tree can remove the bark and outer most water moving vessels of the tree. If severe enough, it can remove all the bark from the tree and eventually kill it. Be on the lookout for the telltale signs of deer activity and consider excluding or putting protective fencing around prized plants.

Voles are a little harder to spot in the winter. Voles are small creatures that look like a short-tailed mouse. They make runways between the turf and the snow cover that are about 1-2 inches wide. Once the snow is melted it looks like a tiny maze of runways zigzagging between plant material. In the areas of the runways, the turf will be nipped off close to the crown of the plant. Normally, the turf will repair itself in the spring and the damage isn't permanent. If the feeding is excessive, the turf can be over seeded in those areas. Voles can also eat away at the green inner bark of trees and shrubs just like rabbits. If the feeding damage is great enough, it can kill young trees and shrubs. If severe damage is noticed, allow the wound to remain open to the elements and breathe. Avoid covering the damaged areas with tree wraps or wound dressings and paints. Voles also steal bulbs from the ground and eat them. If your prized tulip doesn't come up this spring, blame the voles.

What's black with white stripes and is a stinker? You guessed it, the skunk. The well-known smell is enough to warn any passerby of its presence. Skunks are active from dusk until dawn and feed on a wide range of insects. Skunks can cause damage to turf while digging for their next meal. Since they don't feed on landscape plants, why do you need to know about skunks now? We are nearing the prime mating season of the skunk. Males will travel up to 5 miles in search of females, many times over our lovely highways or through landscapes.

Some critters have been busy this winter munching and snacking. Check your landscape plants to see if there is any damage left behind from these critters and try to steer clear of our little smelly friends, their mating season will soon be over.

Elizabeth Exstrom is the Horticulture Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension in Hall County. For more information contact Elizabeth at elizabeth.exstrom@unl.edu, her blog at <http://huskerhort.com/>, or HuskerHort on Facebook and Twitter.