



We have been lucky this winter, but how long will our luck hold out? No, I am not referring to the amount of snow we have received or the 'warm' winter temperatures we've had. Even in a winter like this, wildlife damage can be present in the landscape. Find out about a common villain, what they do and how can keep your landscape from becoming lunch.

Knowing your enemy is key. Voles, with a V, are closer related to a mouse than to a mole. Vole adults weigh about 1-2 ounces and reach about 4 1/2 to 7 inches in length. There are a couple of ways to differentiate between a vole and a mouse. One way is to look at their tail, the tail of a vole is about 1 inch long, compared to mouse whose tail is as long as its body. Voles also have a stocky build and small eyes compared to a mouse. Vole populations can increase rapidly.

Voles feed on a wide range of plant material. Voles will clip off young plants and can dig up seeds of field and forage crops. They can also damage or eat flower bulbs, garden plants, and vegetables. Feeding damage tends to be less during open winters due to the availability of food sources, but it can still happen. Winters with more snow cover offer fewer food choices and they resort to munching on the landscape plants. Some of the damage that voles perform is more cosmetic than permanent. Voles will construct runways by clipping the turf very close to the crown beneath snow cover. These runways are about 1-2 inches wide and allow the voles to move between locations under the cover of snow. Most of the time the damage isn't noticed until the snow melts and the runways are revealed.

Each situation is unique and should be considered when determining whether control is warranted. Voles don't always cause significant damage to property or to the landscape. The quick increase in populations can be cause for concern due to the relationship between the population number and the level of damage. Once a few voles damage a highly valued tree or become a problem in the prized flower bed, control might need to be considered. Usually, it is more cost effective to respond quickly to signs of damage than to wait until the damage becomes severe.

There are several methods that can be used to control voles. The first is habitat modification. Voles like to feel secure in locations where they are protected. Removal and controlling weeds and grasses around young trees and shrubs will help to protect them from nibbling. Be cautious when it comes to using plastic weed barriers, voles will also thrive under the most well laid plans to control weeds.

Exclusion is another method to keep voles away from prized plants. Make a barrier of hardware cloth, 1/4 inch or smaller mesh, and install it around small flower beds or gardens to prevent access of voles in those areas. The fence should be about 12 inches high, or up to 18 inches high if rabbits or ground squirrels are problem, and 2-3 inches of the bottom should be buried in the ground.

If the damage is in a limited area, trapping can be an effective method for controlling voles. Two to three single mouse traps per runway and/or hole will be sufficient to control voles. Place the traps perpendicular to the runway. Bait is not required, but peanut butter mixed with oatmeal can be used if preferred. Multiple-catch mouse traps can also be used. Locate the traps near visible burrows and near vole trails. Place a small amount of seed, either bird or grass, near the entrance points. Baits or toxicants can also be used. Very large populations can be controlled using toxic baits. Read all pesticide product labels thoroughly and comply with the directions.

Repellents are another option for vole control. Sprays that contain thiram and capsaicin are labeled for use on ornamental plants, but not on garden plants or on plants that are to be eaten. Fox or coyote urine may be used. Repellents are fairly costly and may only provide short-term protection. They often need to be reapplied and work best when the voles have another food source to go to.

Be on the look-out for signs of voles, their damage, and take steps now to keep your prized plants from becoming a voles' next meal.

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