

## **Garden Update**

**For week of March 15, 2021**

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### Vole Damage

“What are these trails in my lawn?” This is a common question once snows recede. Pathways interspersed throughout the lawn are an indication of the presence of voles. What are voles, you ask? Voles are rodents with an appearance very similar to mice except for their tails which are about 1 inch long. Voles are granivores and paths may be more apparent around bird feeders, where fallen seed attracts them.

Voles create trails on the soil surface, beneath the snow layer, to stay out of the watchful eyes of predators. They are active throughout the winter, thus providing a surprise to unaware home dwellers when snows melt. Two things contribute to the trails they make. Voles will chew off the turfgrass leaves and crown to make their way through and they also tend to run in single file, wearing down thatch and anything else in their way. The turf loss is alarming but not permanent especially once the growing season returns and then the grass fills in.

Vole damage can be a concern, however, if rock retaining walls are a part of the landscape. Vole tunneling behind rock retaining walls can undermine the structural stability, causing wall collapse. In addition to tunneling, vole feeding can cause permanent damage to fruit trees, new trees and planted bulbs. As seeds and grains become scarce in later winter months, voles will resort to eating tulip bulbs and roots and crowns of trees. Young trees, having limited roots systems, will have significant dieback and even death from vole feeding.

Regular snap traps, baited with peanut butter and birdseed, will manage vole populations. Traps should be placed perpendicular to their trails, with the trap snapping towards the trail. Snap traps will work just fine if there are no pets that can accidentally get caught in them, otherwise a box trap will be a better choice. Box traps are live traps, no bait needed, and placed in the pathway itself. Check the box trap regularly, relocating caught voles to new locations or dropping the trap into a bucket of water to drown them.

Keep in mind the mighty-but-small shrew will enter vole tunnels with the express purpose of eating voles. If you should capture one of these little guys in a box trap, be sure to release them back into the yard to continue their work. They may be a lot smaller than voles but that doesn't deter shrews from making quick work of them. Mulch piled against the bark of trees and shrubs affords voles the opportunity to do damage to roots and trunks. Mulch should be piled no higher than four inches and never against the base of trees and shrubs. Hang bird feeders over paved surfaces and periodically sweep up fallen seed to remove food sources that attract voles.

More information about voles and their management may be found at:

<https://extensionpublications.unl.edu/assets/html/g887/build/g887.htm> .