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What Can I Do To Prevent Vole Damage In My Yard?

Terry Messmer

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A weekly question/answer column

What Can I Do To Prevent Vole Damage In My Yard?

Terry Messmer answers:*

Voles are small, mice-like critters that can cause severe damage to orchards, ornamentals and trees by girdling. Sometimes the damage they do is credited to mice and rabbits. Voles usually eat grasses, forbs, roots, bark, snails and insects, and to find food, they build tunnels and surface runways. They prefer heavy ground cover of grasses and grasslike plants or litter. Here are some tips to help control them:

- Eliminate weeds, ground cover and litter around lawns and ornamental plantings.
- Cover should be cleared three feet or more from the base of trees.
- Cylinders of hardware cloth can protect individual plants and should be buried six inches below the ground surface.
- Frightening devices are ineffective.
- Two repellents are approved — Thiram is a fungicide and capsaicin is the chemical that makes peppers hot. They alter the taste of plants and make them unpalatable, but their effectiveness is short-lived.
- Lethal control includes two approved toxicants — zinc phosphide and anticoagulants. Both can be effective but there are safety concerns that must be addressed before using them. Information about these toxicants is available through your local USU Extension office.
- If voles invade the home, which is rare, they can be removed with the same snap traps or live traps used for mice.
- While they pose no major public health problems, voles can carry disease organisms and should only be handled with appropriate protective clothing such as leather gloves.

* Terry Messmer is Utah State University Extension Wildlife Specialist .