

Squirrels and Moles

The two animal pests we receive the most calls about are squirrels and moles. Deer are a close third, but for many of us who live in an urban setting, nothing plagues the gardener quite like the digging and feeding of squirrels and moles.

Squirrels

Squirrels often become pests if they begin to nest in attics or garages or if they are emptying your bird feeder. The squirrels in my neighborhood love to dig up my plants and take single bites out of almost ripe tomatoes, leaving the remainder to rot on top of my fence.

If squirrels plague your home and garden, your first choice may be to exterminate the rodents. If this is the action you wish to take, make sure to identify the type of squirrel you have as some species are protected. If you do determine the species isn't protected and that you're in the correct season (check with the Kansas Department of Wildlife Parks and Tourism for hunting regulations) make sure your control method is humane and legal.

Occasionally, squirrels manage to enter into some portion of the home (attic and basement are common) which is generally easy to fix. Look for entrance points near telephone wires and tree limbs as these points are how the squirrels get on top of your house. Trimming back tree branches can be extremely effective. Remember, squirrels can jump up to 6 feet! Squirrels that have made their way into basements usually gain access through the chimney or a furnace opening. Close these holes with metal, fencing or another chew-proof material. If you must first remove the animal from your home, attempt to do so by opening windows and allowing time for the squirrel to leave.

The friendliest method to keep squirrels out of your home is to provide nesting boxes for them to live in on nearby trees. Boxes should be made of metal or untreated wood to stand up to chewing.

For the squirrel eating your bird food, you have a few options. The first is to recognize that squirrels are part of your home's wildlife and that placing food outside feeds many different creatures. In addition, you may want to provide ears of corn on the ground at least 8 feet away from your feeder. This may keep the squirrels occupied enough to leave your feeder alone. If you'd like to deter the feeding altogether, look for ways to make the feeder difficult to climb and grasp. PVC wrapped around poles and chains will spin the squirrels off the feeder as long as they are at least 24 inches long so the squirrels cannot jump over that section.

To keep squirrels out of the garden, wiring and fencing are most effective. For bulbs, lay down a layer of chicken wire in the bottom of your bed, add the bulbs and soil and then another layer of chicken wire on top. This fencing can also be used to protect other crops. Place the fencing at least 30 inches high and bury it 6 inches deep. To protect your trees, wrap tree trunks in a metal band that is 2 feet wide and 6 feet off of the ground.

Repellants have unreliable results with tree squirrels. Poisons are illegal to use on squirrels as they pose a risk to other wildlife.

Moles

Moles are known for their mounds and hills that ruin lawns and trip up anyone who walks across them. Creating extensive underground passageways, moles use their passageways for finding the insects, snail larvae, spiders, small vertebrates, earthworms and vegetation to eat.

Moles favor loose, sandy loam soils as they are easier to move and find food in. Heavy, dry clay soils are considered undesirable mole habitat.

Mole damage in lawns will appear primarily as hills (tunnels) and mounds of soil. Sometimes lawns will have brown spots, but this is attributed to the root disturbance, as moles are not directly feeding on grass roots. Although their movement may indirectly cause damage to vegetation, the insect feeding moles provide is considered beneficial.

Repellents are sometimes marketed for moles. No repellent has substantial research that proves their effectiveness.

Toxicants, or poisons, have barriers to success. Although there are many substances that kill moles, it is a requirement that the mole ingests the bait. Grain baits have few similarities to the squirming mole favorites, grubs and worms. Moles may have limited vision, but they're clever animals that require work to eradicate.

Fumigants are a toxicant that is placed in a mole tunnel and releases a toxic gas. Most fumigants are Restricted Use Pesticides and require a licensed technician to apply.

Traps are the most successful and practical method for mole removal when properly placed. Three kinds of traps work best for moles; scissor-jawed, harpoon and nash. Each name gives you some idea as to what they do. Each of these traps is spring released, like a mouse trap.

For each trap, you must select a tunnel that is in current use, not a tunnel used by the mole for feeding, as it will likely not re-visit that area. To locate an active tunnel look along fences, the house or sidewalk for a fairly straight tunnel. Step on one portion of the tunnel to collapse it. Wait a few days and if the tunnel has been repaired, it is likely that the mole regularly uses this tunnel.

The harpoon trap has sharp spikes that impale the mole underground. To set this trap take the side of your palm, making a karate chop motion and depress a portion of the tunnel. If you use your foot or you flatten your palm, you'll likely create too large of a depression. Set the harpoon over this area. When the mole comes to repair this portion, it will trigger the trap. If the portion of soil is too wide, the trap will engage but the mole may be inches out of reach.

The scissor-jawed trap requires you to dig out a portion of the mole's tunnel and repack it around the trap. The trap should be set to straddle the runway. The bottom of the runway

should be an inch above the points of the jaws. When the mole comes to repair this portion, he will be caught in the jaws of the trap. Take care to loosen the soil around the trap so the jaws can close easily and quickly.

For the choker trap you'll need to make an excavation across the tunnel. Make this hole slightly lower than the tunnel itself and only as wide as the trap. Pack soil firmly underneath the trigger-pan and set the trap so that the trigger rests on the built up soil. Fill the area with loose, gravel-free soil, ensuring all light is blocked out.

If you haven't caught a mole after two days the mole may have changed its habits, the trap was improperly set or the tunnel was disturbed too much. No matter the cause the trap should be relocated.

Often when we get calls about wildlife issues, homeowners want to trap and release, believing this is the most humane action. Not only is trapping illegal for many species, and always if you do not have the land owner's permission to dump wild animals on their property, but it is often the least humane option. Animals that are trapped and released do not know where to find food, shelter or where the predators are in that area. Due to these factors, in addition to the stress of being trapped, most of these animals die soon after being released. The best way to avoid issues with wildlife is prevent problems through habitat modification.

For more information on these animal pests as well as others can be found online at: <https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/pests.html> or by calling our Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Response Line (785) 232- 0062 ext. 105. The Response Line is open Monday-Thursday 1 pm-5 pm and Friday 9 am-12 pm and 1 pm- 5 pm.