



What's eating my plant?

You may not like the answers

COURTESY OF DANIL KOMOV VIA UNSPLASH.COM

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Question: Something is eating the tomatoes in my garden. They are hollowed out and almost entirely eaten. What could it be?

AnsWER: It is frustrating to go out to harvest the fruits and vegetables we've worked so hard to grow, only to find them ruined by some insect or animal.

Most of us know about deer, and fence them out of our vegetable gardens, but what else might be dining on your crops? There is a myriad of possibilities here in Douglas County including squirrels, rabbits, gophers, raccoons, opossums, skunks...

However, we are going to talk about one that most of us don't like to talk about – rats!

Rats are quite common in our area and, depending on where you live, you could have a big problem or no problem at all with rats going after your produce.

First, some rat basics: there are two main types of rats here. The common house or roof rat, *Rattus rattus*, can weigh from 2-11 ounces, has a skinnier snout and a longer tail than the Norway rat, aka brown rat, *Rattus norvegicus*.

Norway rats are larger, weighing from 5-18 ounces. They prefer ground level nests and burrows as opposed to their roof rat cousins, who are great climbers.

Rats are mainly nocturnal. They have poor eyesight and prefer to travel along straight lines like next to curbs, walls, etc. This discussion will focus on rat control and prevention in relation to the vegetable garden.

The main way to deter rats around your garden focuses on prevention. If your property doesn't provide what rats need such as shelter from predators, food and water, they will move on to a place that is more hospitable. If you are unfortunate and live next to someone who provides a rat resort, it will be a challenge to keep rats out of your garden.

Here are some ways to make your property less desirable to rats:

- If you compost, make sure you are not adding meats, grains or oils to your pile. These products are quite attractive to rats. Locate your compost pile away from your garden and/or use rodent-resistant containers for your compost.



Janet Bitter
Ask a Master Gardener

- Store pet, bird and chicken food in rodent-proof containers.

- Remove fallen fruits and nuts.

- Eliminate water sources, especially standing water.

- Keep grass and weeds low and trim back plants to take away cover for rats.

- Use hardware cloth around the bottom of deer fencing around your garden. Make sure it goes underground. If you have the black roof rats, however, they will climb up the wire fencing to get into your garden. You can run an electrical wire around your fence to deter them.

If you have done all you can in terms of trying to prevent the rat problem, but you go out and your prize watermelon is now a hollowed-out shell (I might have had this experience), you may need to resort to some control measures.

There are rat poisons on the market, but these are not pest-specific and, in fact, are toxic to predators, pets and even children. If you choose to use one of these baits, you must – by law – follow the label directions. There are other ways to control rats where we can be more certain to target the rat population specifically.

Some natural repellents mentioned in literature include mint or mint oil, eucalyptus and predator urine (which you can buy dried). However, according to Dr. Dana Sanchez of OSU, there haven't been any replicated studies which show these scents to be effective in repelling rats.

The basic snap trap is very effective. Make sure and use the rat-size trap, not the smaller mouse-size traps. The key to using these traps is to put them in the rat runways – the paths they routinely use in navigating from nest to food.

Also, to safeguard from catching another animal in the trap, put the trap in a shoebox and cut out two (rat-sized) holes in either side of the box. Place the whole box on the rat trail.

Recommended bait for the trap is peanut butter or smelly cheese. It is best to use gloves



PHOTO BY JANET BITTER

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when handling the box/trap to avoid human scent. Rats are smart. Use lots of traps in areas you think are the runways.

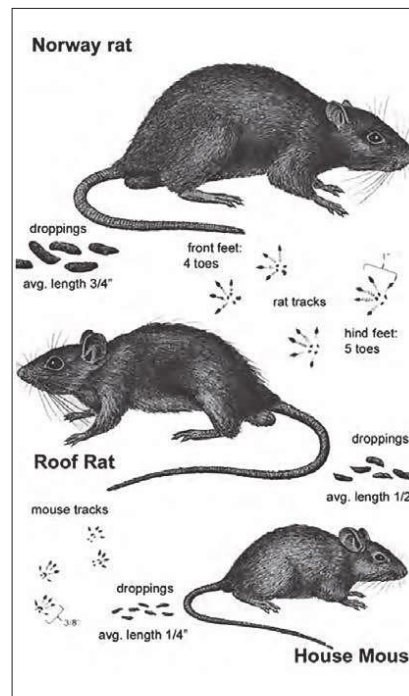
There are new, electronic traps that are reported to be effective also – they electrocute the rats when entering the trap.

Cats are certainly helpful for some rodent control, but they generally prefer smaller, defenseless prey and are not as effective for rat control.

One interesting tactic being used in some cities where there are major rat problems is terrier-pack leasing. This sounds appealing to me, but my husband put his foot down on bringing in a dozen or so terriers. Too bad.

Hopefully, you can use some of the suggestions above to deter those hungry rats and reap the rewards of your hard work before those beady-eyed rodents have a melon or tomato party at your expense. Good luck.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg, Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



COURTESY OF PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Norway and roof rats are the two main types of rats in Douglas County.