



Pondering the topic for this column had me looking out at the garden (otherwise known as the weed patch at this time of the year) for inspiration. And then it came to me in a flash, a flash of rabbit fur. Dashing out the door, I searched for which precious plant had boldly survived the drought only to be brought to its knees, literally, by the rabbits. This year, and the four others before it, has not only been tough on the plants we love – but the plants that wildlife feed on as well. That means that as those critters try to survive on scarcer food supplies, our garden plants are going to look more attractive as a food source and be hit harder. We will have to be more vigilant in protecting those valuable plants from foraging wildlife if the gardens are to stay intact. This doesn't necessarily mean a death sentence for wildlife – after all, we do invite them into our yards by the good garden practices followed and by the habitats provided. It just means that some control methods should be explored, and prepared for, when looking at protecting plants.

Okay – so it's not that I really want to pick on rabbits, but I'm going to anyway. While cute and cuddly looking, *Sylvilagus floridanus* (eastern cottontail rabbit), can devastate a lot of plant material in a very short amount of time. At maturity, this species can reach almost 20" and weigh in at up to 4 pounds. Although they live for only about a year to a year and a half – they mature quickly and that's means a big, hungry rabbit. High reproduction rates – often six young per litter and up to four litters per year – guarantee the need for lots of food. Although vegetable gardens are often hit hard during the growing season, ornamental plantings will be quite delectable in the late fall, after hard frosts, and then throughout the winter months.

Early protection is the key to damage avoidance. What to do, what to do...before the ground freezes solid, put up some prevention barriers - it is much easier to do this now rather than digging into frozen soil later. Fencing made specifically for rabbits is readily available, but chicken wire, hardware cloth or any other small mesh will work just fine. Look for hole spacing of 1" or less. You will need about 24" of above ground height to keep the rabbits from jumping or climbing over. Keep in mind that snow cover will decrease the height of protection – those rabbits will be much closer to the top edge of the fencing from a tall snow drift. So, it doesn't hurt to go a bit higher. Measure the circumference of the plant to be protected and add enough to the measurement to accommodate all of the branches without any danger of rubbing damage - and then add about six extra inches to allow for securing the ends together. Using leather or very heavy cloth gloves and a good metal snips, cut the amount of wire needed to encircle the entire plant. Twist the wire ends to form a tube-like cage. At this point, bend the top edge of the wire over slightly at an outward angle to keep most of the climbing critters at bay. At the base, it is recommended to bury at least 3" under the soil to prevent minor tunneling. As an alternative, I have found that bending the bottom edge up and out and then tightly securing that bent area with tent stakes, or u-shaped wires does work quite well without damaging the root system. And with those sharp edges bent upward,

rabbits will stay away from the base. While it is not generally necessary to use any other stakes to secure the wire cages, three small diameter bamboo stakes placed snugly against the inside of the cage and inserted into the ground, help to hold the cage in place through most fall, winter, and spring storms. If you are covering the trunks of young trees, allow 3" - 4" of air space between the tree and the wire cage. Be extra careful in constructing and handling the cages near the tree trunks as young bark tissue can be easily damaged by sharp wires.

Other control methods range from habitat modification to repellent sprays to live traps and hunting. I know – many of you do not want to hear about hunting, but it is a viable control option in many areas, where permitted by law, of course. Let's look at the other options. Habitat modification is a simple control that should be done now to prevent good over-wintering sites for rabbit populations. Rabbits are drawn to areas that provide needed cover at different times of the year. Brush and rock piles, loose or unused foundation areas, old burrows, and thick vegetation all meet the requirements for rabbit cover. Take a look around the yard and remove that brush, finish that wall project, and clean up those weedy areas – those projects have just been sitting around and waiting for you to get to them anyway. Repellents can be quite effective and are certainly a viable option for control, when applied according to the label, at the recommended timings, and at the right temperatures. But – they do dissipate rather rapidly under damp weather conditions, so frequent reapplication is often necessary to maintain maximum control. There are plants that are not generally preferred by rabbits and do not see much damage at any time throughout the year, so control on those may not even be necessary. Lists are out there and available, but I'll be honest – rabbits will eat what's there when they're hungry, and like all of us when hungry enough, food preferences will go by the wayside. So keep your eyes open for the early stages of feeding damage and be prepared to apply as needed to what's needed. Most of the repellent sprays on the market are a combination of ingredients that are quite smelly (to us humans) for only a day or two after application. Thiram, ziram, potassium, naphthalene, garlic, putrescent egg solids, pepper oils, dried blood, tobacco by-products, and sulfates are just some that are used. While live traps are not the most effective control method during the growing season, they can be very effective when food is scarce during the winter months. If considering using live traps – keep in mind that you cannot release any animal into any area without permission. So, be sure to have a release area designated, with all necessary permissions given, before you even buy a live trap. Once you have secured an area for release, set out the trap and bait with fruit, greens, or even rabbit droppings from other areas of the yard. Please, please, please be humane in your treatment of trapped rabbits.

Thinking about control now will allow you time to be thoughtful in the methods used and to be prepared to act quickly if you notice wildlife damage.