Friday’s Feature
By
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Rodents in the landscape

Rodents in the landscape are more common than most people think. They can lurk in trees and shrubs, under houses, and in outbuildings.

Rats especially are notorious for spreading fleas and diseases, and since they live and share the same habitat with squirrels, it may be this contact that considerably increases the incidence of squirrels becoming infested with fleas.

Because rats are most active at night and are rarely seen during the day, it is necessary to recognize signs of their activity.

Most people first notice rodents by finding droppings in and around buildings. Old droppings are gray, dusty, and will crumble. Fresh droppings are black, shiny, and puttylike.

Another sign are gnawed objects. Rodents gnaw every day in order to keep their teeth short and sharp and to gain entrance or to obtain food. Teeth marks on food, building materials, wire, and edges of beams are indications of gnawing.

Rats also habitually use the same paths or runways between harborage and food or water. Outside runways are paths 2-3 inches wide and appear as smooth, hard packed trails under vegetation.

What can you do to get rid of a rat or mouse? Well, when you first see signs, act immediately to eradicate the first immigrants. Don’t give them time to reproduce.

Good housekeeping or sanitation is a basic factor in rodent control. Eliminating food, water, and harborage for rats and mice can reduce rodent populations rapidly. To implement sanitation practices:

- Clean up garbage and rubbish.
- Properly store garbage, pet food and bird seed.
- Remove harborages such as piles of rubbish, junk and protected enclosures.
- Pick fruits and vegetables when ripe so rodents will not feed on them.

Birds of prey, hawks and owls feed on large numbers of rodents and are exceptional rat killers. Snakes such
as rat snakes, king snakes, pine snakes and black racers eat numerous rodents and are important in controlling rodent populations. Do not kill non-poisonous snakes.

Trapping is an underrated method of controlling rodents. Traps can be used to eliminate rats where poison baits would be dangerous.

It is important to place traps where the rats are. Rats and mice have different behavior around new objects. Rats are cautious, and it may be a week before they approach a trap. Mice are curious and will normally approach traps the first night. If you don't catch a mouse in the first few nights, the trap is in the wrong location. To help rats overcome trap shyness, place traps unset, in place, for several days. This allows rats to overcome shyness and results in better catches.

Traps are effective usually when dealing with small numbers of rats or mice. When rats are plentiful or where unsanitary conditions exist with harborage, poisoned baits are an effective tool to use with trapping.

Poison baits are readily available. Whenever a rodenticide is used, safety must be the first consideration. Poison baits must be placed where they are inaccessible to children, pets, livestock and wildlife or in special bait stations. Baits stations should always be placed near where rats live and breed or along travel routes.

When you control your rats, encourage your neighbor to control their rats at the same time. The greater the area that is controlled, the more effective the results will be and the longer it will take new rats to migrate back to your property.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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