

Plants that are gopher resistant

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Q: Now that you've ventured into a discussion of rats and lemons, how about gophers and euphorbias? I have an ongoing gopher problem and decided to replace some vanished/eaten plants with euphorbia, thinking that gophers wouldn't eat it. I chose 'Blackbird' because it's an interesting cultivar. However, the 1-gallon plant disappeared overnight in true gopher-eaten fashion, with nothing left but some small withered leaves in the dirt for the forensic team to investigate. Comments?

A: Sadly, it appears that you have just invested some hard-earned cash in definitive proof that gophers do eat 'Blackbird' euphorbia. Too bad. I checked photographs and see it's an attractive plant with dark purple leaves.

No doubt your hope that gophers might not eat a euphorbia sprang from the reputation of *Euphorbia lathyris*, often called gopher spurge, which is reputed to repel the furry destructors. All euphorbias contain a "milky" (e.g. white) sap that is an irritant or toxin to humans and other animals.

Its potency varies among euphorbias, so gophers may not eat some kinds, but there is no solid evidence that even gopher spurge keeps gophers out of gardens.

So what won't gophers eat? Among the safest bets are daffodils and naked ladies ([Amaryllis belladonna](#)). Some other plants that show up often on "gophers won't eat" lists are columbine (*aquilegia*), artemisia, ceanothus, rock rose (*cistus*), breath of heaven (*coleonema*), foxglove (*digitalis*), lantana, lavender, mimulus, heavenly bamboo (*nandina*), Indian hawthorn (*rhamphiolepis*), rosemary, and native or other perennial salvias. Keep in mind, however, that food choices of mammal pests are not entirely predictable. (Readers, any tips?)

To grow plants with no track record of repelling gophers, you can line beds with hardware cloth (sheets of wire mesh) or plant them in buried wire mesh baskets. There are baskets for smaller or larger plants. Gopher-plagued gardeners have also welcomed the new cinch trap, which is much easier to set and use than older types. You can see videos about the traps, and buy them too, at www.gopherslimited.com or (831) 335-2400. You can also purchase wire baskets on the website and learn to install them or more extensive wire barriers.

Another way to reduce the population of gophers and other rodents in an area is to encourage their natural predators. The first step in doing so is to avoid using poisons of any kind to kill rodents, since the poisoned rodents will kill predators that eat them.

In addition, you can install barn owl nests to attract these majestic and helpful birds. A barn owl pair and offspring can eat 3,000 gophers over a four month period, and they may have two broods a year if food is plentiful. The birds also eat rats, mice and voles. You can read about and purchase barn owl nests through the Hungry Owl Project in [San Anselmo](#) (www.hungryowl.org, (415) 454-4587).

[Barn owls](#) hunt mainly 1 to 4 miles from their nests, so the nests are best installed as a community effort. (Any environmental organizers interested in a really good project?) Nests in parks or golf courses could serve large numbers of area gardens. It is actually better that the birds hunt at some distance from home, since they can be noisy, and the distance lets human residents get some sleep. The fact that the birds aren't territorial means that quite a few nesting boxes can be clustered in one area.

Q: I read with interest your article on discouraging rats in your garden. I have a problem with squirrels. Do you think owls would help for this as well?

A: Barn owls are unlikely to help with either ground squirrels or tree squirrels. The squirrels are out in the daytime, barn owls at night. [The great horned owl](#), which we do have in our area, has been known to hunt tree squirrels, banging against their nests at night to flush them out. (Horned owls also eat the smaller barn owls that are such a help with other pest rodents. Barn owl nesting boxes have to be designed to keep them out.)

Local ground and tree squirrel predators include red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks, bobcats, coyotes, domestic cats and dogs. To encourage squirrel predators, avoid secondary poisonings by not using any kind of poison baits. While predators are not likely to solve your squirrel problem, as part of your efforts, you can install perches 20-25 feet tall from which hawks can hunt near populations of either kind of squirrel. Perches are available for sale from Wild Wing Company (www.wildwingco.com, (707) 795-4560). Barn owls will use the perches too, when hunting other rodents.

I've written about reducing tree squirrel damage several times, including a roundup on Oct. 25, 2009 (www.sfgate.com/ZKMZ), that suggested barrier methods and commercial hot pepper spray.

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