

Protecting your native landscape from Rabbits

by Frank Hassler
Ecologist and Owner of Good Oak Ecological Services

Our native Eastern cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) is the nemesis of many gardeners. Not only do they nibble on the plants in our vegetable beds, they also tend to graze on tender young native plants. After all, these native plants are their natural food! In the past there were a lot of plants and only a few rabbits, their numbers kept in check by predators. Today there are few native plants and a lot of hungry rabbits, which can spell disaster for some landscaping projects. Some locations have more rabbits than others and their populations are known to grow and shrink from one year to the next. Because of this, we recommend keeping a watchful eye on your new planting while taking a “wait and see” approach. If rabbits do start to impact your young plants you should act quickly. Native plants are robust and will survive some grazing but repeated visits by rabbits will weaken the plants’ root stores and eventually kill them.

Rabbit-proof plants?

Rabbits do not typically eat grasses, sedges and ferns, however, there are always exceptions. They will eat just about any flowering plant, shrub or tree seedling. Among these there are plants which they prefer more than others, but few that are truly “rabbit proof”. Lilies are quickly devoured if discovered by a rabbit. Members of the Aster family, including asters, sunflowers, goldenrods, coreopsis, liatris, joe-pye weeds, and many others are quite vulnerable. Rabbits will even feed on the young leaves of milkweeds, and these plants have high levels of toxic compounds in their milky sap. In the winter the small, tender branches of many young trees and shrubs are vulnerable. Even the intimidating thorns of hawthorns don’t scare them off.

Not including the many species that rabbits feed on in your planting would lead to a poor planting indeed, so the best bet is to protect the plants for a season or two until they become established. Plants are vulnerable when they are young, because their leaves are tender and they haven’t had time to establish significant energy stores in their roots. But as plants mature their leaves become more course and less palatable to rabbits. They then begin to store more sugars in their roots so they can resprout new growth quickly if they are browsed upon every now and then. So all we have to do is to get our little plants through their childhood and they’ll be able to thrive and fend for themselves.

“Natural” Solutions?

There are many “natural” solutions and home remedies to rabbit browsing that people have tried over the years. Spreading bloodmeal which rabbits find distasteful or domestic rabbit pellets (dung) in the hopes that it will ward off cottontail rabbits who avoid entering the territory of other rabbits, are just two of many home remedies for deterring rabbits. Though some people swear by them, the effectiveness of these methods is hit or miss at best. Therefore we cannot recommend these or any other “natural” methods to you as a solution to a rabbit grazing problem.

Liquid Fence®

Liquid Fence® is a product which gets mixed reviews, but more positive reviews than negative, so this

is the only “spray on” solution that we recommend. In particular, the Dual Action Rabbit Repellent provides the best results. The biggest complaint most people have about Liquid Fence® is the smell, so some people don't like it for use in a residential setting. Perhaps try just a little to see what you think.

The advantage of this product is that you don't have to construct and install any permanent structures to defend your plants which takes time and effort and impacts the aesthetic quality of your planting. The disadvantage is that, assuming it works well for you, you will have to re-apply the product after every rainfall, which happens frequently in the spring when plants are young and most vulnerable to rabbit attack. The aim with Liquid Fence® is to only use it for a month or two in the spring when the plants are most vulnerable. Also, once you learn which species the rabbits prefer to eat you can limit its use to just those plants. Eventually, the plants put on sufficient tough, mature leaves and you should be able to cease application as the rabbits will be off looking for a more tender meal.

Cages

The only sure bet to prevent damage is fencing to keep the rabbits away from the plant. You have two choices: fence around every plant which is being eaten or fence the entire yard or planting area.

The little “cages” around each individual are easy to construct with 24” to 36” tall lengths of chicken wire and 2-3 wooden stakes each. Other fencing material that you may find more attractive will do, as long as you are sure the holes are small enough to prevent even baby bunnies from getting through. These stakes should be firmly pounded into the ground 6” to 12” away from the plant and the fencing can be stapled to them. If you are careful, you can later remove these little cages and move them to other plants as needed.

Fencing

For an area with many plants it will undoubtedly be easier to simply construct a fence around the entire planting. This fence should be 3' to 4' tall in order to prevent rabbits from hopping over it. You may wish to bend the top four to six inches of fencing outward to create a flare that will make it harder for the rabbits to hop over. This is easiest if the stakes are a few inches shorter than the fencing. The stakes themselves should be about four feet apart.

Many experts recommend digging a 6” deep trench around your planting and establishing the fence within this trench so that the rabbits cannot dig their way under the fence. This is a lot of work and disturbs a lot of soil (making it easy for rabbits to dig in). So we recommend a “wait and see” approach, and only go through this extra effort if you find the rabbits are actually tunneling under your defenses. Instead, we recommend installing the fence snug against the ground. Then use “garden staples” or “sod staples” to secure the fence firmly into the ground in between stakes.

Reinforcing Your Existing Fence

If your yard already has a fence around it, the easiest method is to protect your planting is to “rabbit-proof” your existing fence. Solid fences should be sufficient protection, as long as there are not gaps at the bottom that animals could burrow under. If you find any gaps, fill them in with gravel or hard packed soil and monitor the area for any burrowing.

Unfortunately, the holes in chain link fences are large enough that baby bunnies can sneak through and these fences are often not secure all the way to the ground so even larger rabbits can squeeze underneath. Picket fences and others with larger gaps will need to be reinforced as well. The method is similar to constructing a fence from scratch. Use chicken wire (or similar) fencing that is 2' tall (for chain-link fences, taller if there are larger gaps in the fence as is the case with picket fences). Be sure

that this fencing is snug to the ground and “staple” the bottom into the ground as well. Affix this chicken wire fence to your existing fence using twist ties, zip-ties or staples (for wood fences).

Winter Shrub and Sapling Protection

Rabbits survive the winter partially by nibbling on the buds and thin, tender bark of shrubs and tree seedlings. In order to prevent rabbits from using young trees as winter food, hardware cloth should be wrapped around the trunk before the onset of each winter to prevent rabbits from eating the bark and girdling the tree. You can re-use the same cages for a few years, at which time the bark should be thick enough to prevent rabbit damage. This hardware cloth barrier should be about 4” tall, or 2’ higher than the expected snow level (whichever is taller), and be snug to the ground, protecting any exposed root flair.

For multi-stemmed shrubs you will need to form a cage for the shrub similar to, but larger than the ones described above for protecting herbaceous plants. These cages should be made with at least three sturdy stakes, be at least four feet tall and leave about 6 inches between the edge of the fence and the nearest branch you want protected.