

POCKET GOPHERS



The telltale crescent-shaped mounds of soil that pop up without warning in yards and agricultural fields mean only one thing: trouble.

Mounds of soil with a two-inch dimple on top are the trademark of the pocket gopher, a pest of great magnitude in lawns, gardens, agricultural fields and earthen ditches. As long as there is water and tender plant roots around, they are indiscriminate in where

they set up house keeping. If you are fighting one or more of these pests, a few facts may help give you the upper hand.

The pocket gopher is between five and seven inches long and covered with pale to dark brown soft fur. It is heavy bodied with a wide head, very small ears and eyes, and a tail that can reach three and one-half inches long. The front feet are enlarged and are armed with long claws suited for digging. The long upper and lower front teeth make it easy to chew on roots and tubers.

Because pocket gophers spend their entire lives in the soil, leaving only occasionally to feed on the surface or to travel to a new area, most people will not recognize them if they chance to encounter one above ground. However, the presence of fresh, loose mounds of soil is a dead giveaway that they have arrived.

Gophers build extensive horizontal, below ground tunnel systems at a depth of approximately four to sixteen inches. Occasionally they will send up a vertical shaft to the surface to admit air and to provide an exit if necessary. It is at the end of these vertical tunnels that the soil is deposited.

Gophers dig with powerful front feet and push excess soil up the vertical shafts to deposit it in mounds above ground. After the day's work is done, the gopher closes the door by pushing a load of fresh soil into the opening and effectively seals itself off from the outside world. The dimple on top of the mound is the door. In contrast, the familiar ground squirrel, which also lives in dens below ground, leaves its door open.

Interestingly enough, gophers usually live alone in one tunnel system, but the young may remain in a female's habitat for a short time after leaving the nest. Gophers have also been known to move into another tunnel if it is vacated.

Once it is time for the young gophers to find their own home, they may have to travel some distance to find a suitable location. Adults will also pack up and head out in search of new digs when food sources run low. During this time above ground they are extremely vulnerable to cats, dogs and other potential predators because they are relatively slow and cumbersome in their movement.



Gophers are strictly plant eaters. They can subsist on the roots of grasses, but they much prefer tubers, bulbs and the roots of weeds and shrubs. Given time, they can kill small shrubs and can cause extensive damage to vegetable and flower gardens. They are also pests of agricultural fields. They are especially destructive when they burrow into the sides of earthen ditches. Frequently, water from these ditches will find the holes and, running through the soil, erode away the sides of the ditch. If the ditch gives way, a lot of water ends up running where it does not belong.

If gophers and their mounds become a problem in the yard, there are several options available to cut down or eliminate the population in a given area. There are four recognized ways of controlling pocket gophers in the home yard: trapping, gassing, poisoning and excluding.

Exclusion is only effective in small garden areas or where cost of control is not a factor. Selected areas can be protected by placing metal sheeting or concrete 24 inches or more below the soil surface and 10 to 12 inches above ground level. Light, sandy soils may require deeper protection, perhaps down to 36 inches in order to keep the animals out.

Poison baits are sold that, when used correctly, can provide some control. Poison granules must be placed into the tunnel in a way that does not warn the gopher that something unusual has occurred. Minimize any handling of the bait by bare hands to avoid contaminating the material with human smell and for self protection. Use a long handled spoon to place the bait well into the tunnel away from the area disturbed by unearthing the tunnel. By placing the poison into the tunnel, it also reduces the potential for non-target animals like birds, pets and other animals to find and consume the bait.

Gassing gophers is quite effective in smaller tunnel systems. A vacuum cleaner hose connected to the exhaust of an automobile or gasoline powered lawn mower will usually kill in 10 to 15 minutes. In larger systems, the gas may dissipate into the surrounding soil before it reaches the gopher.

Trapping is the surest way of knowing if the animal actually has been killed. It is also method that is usually the most successful.

Macabee gopher traps are available from many nurseries and hardware stores. At least two need to be set in each tunnel, one pointed up the tunnel and the other pointed in the opposite direction. Both need to be wired to a stake driven into the ground outside the tunnel to prevent trap loss. Be sure to remove all of the soil from the tunnel to make room for the trap. A teaspoon is very helpful in excavating out both the vertical and horizontal tunnels.

After applying one or more of the control methods, watch for new mounds of soil. If none appear, it is safe to conclude that success has been achieved.

Gophers can cause considerable damage to landscapes and gardens and to power tools such as mowers and edgers. By carefully and intelligently applying gopher control techniques, safe control of these pests can be achieved.