GARDEN OF EAT’N

HOMEOWNERS CAN COEXIST WITH WILDLIFE – BUT YOU NEED A PLAN  

by BECKY JOHNSON

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escaped the busy urban hum of the city by moving to the quiet countryside of southwestern New Hampshire, where my family and I enjoy having the space to grow some of our own food and seasonal flowers. In the fall, I spend many hours digging in the dirt, dreaming of that splash and pop of early spring color that only bulbs can deliver. Last year, when I planted tulips, I carefully worked some bone meal into the soil to encourage root growth. I tucked the bulbs into the flowerbed and covered each with soil and mulch.

The next morning, I went out to admire my hours of effort, only to find bulbs scattered around the yard! Was this mess the work of neighborhood pranksters? I spent several hours replanting the bulbs, wondering what had happened. With the help of a surveillance camera recording that night, I discovered that the damage wasn’t caused by teenage tricksters - but by a coyote! I watched the footage of a scruffy looking, lanky-legged canine, happily digging and rolling around in the bone meal-enriched soil. The next day, I replanted the bulbs in fresh earth - this time without the bone meal - all the while, I kicked myself for offering an open invitation for pests to make merry in my yard.

All You Can Eat Buffet
It is entertaining to look out your window and see an adorable rabbit or deer foraging in your yard - until you realize that weeks, or even months, of work and planning can be eaten up in one night’s binge. Luscious greens, fruit trees and herbs can become a virtual smorgasbord for critters on the prowl for an easy meal. A home gardener not only has to fight off invertebrate pests, but also opportunistic animals.

I soon found that rabbits and deer had elected my garden as their favorite all-you-can-eat buffet. One morning, my five-year-old daughter and I were in the yard surveying nibble marks on some vegetables. She asked me, “Why don’t you let the bunnies share our garden? They’re hungry, too.”

I twisted the sprayer top onto my bottle of homemade cayenne-fortified pest spray and considered the plea of my young advocate for nature. “We grow these veggies for our dinner,” I said, as I readied my arsenal.

“The bunnies can have my veggies, Mama.”

Paw and Claw Licking-Good
Bird watchers and poultry enthusiasts are not exempt from wildlife intrusion. A bear or red squirrel may think your peanut butter-packed suet feeder that hangs seductively from a tree branch is a summons to visit your yard, and before you know it, they are regular patrons. Fresh eggs from chicken coops draw foxes, weasels and coyotes, as they love a good meal that’s high in protein. Predation of chickens and other poultry has become the most common source of agricultural damage by bears in New Hampshire, and incidents of bobcats raiding chicken coops are on the rise.

I’ve lost many free-range chicks and young pullets to ravenous raptors, both at night and in broad daylight. One evening, I was too late to close my coop’s door, and I was met by an owl that swooshed out of the coop. He had slipped in and enjoyed several chicken dinners before my arrival. During the daytime, one of my unsuspecting chicks ran around the yard out in the open, and I helplessly watched as a hawk swooped in and grabbed it, leaving only feathers behind.

Protecting your Property
Property owners can find themselves at war with the wildlife attracted to their yards, but it doesn’t have to come to that. Consider some tried and true methods to deny mischievous intruders access to your garden or livestock. Some approaches are simple and inexpensive, while others can require a sizable investment.

The easiest approach is prevention. Garbage, uneaten food and unwashed containers are attractive to bears, coyotes and other scavengers. Be sure to clean up and secure trash, and remove leftover feed and spillover from livestock areas. Maintain proper storage of livestock feed, as poorly secured grains and odoriferous food items are an invitation to animals that are looking for a free meal.

Install motion-sensitive lighting and remove brush, large bushes and nearby trees to deny predators places to hide. Use noise-making devices, such as a radio at low volume or wind chimes in your yard, and nearby trees to deny predators places to hide. Mount motion-sensitive sprinkler heads in strategic places.

Another strategy is to divert wildlife from your prized garden greens and ornamental shrubbery by creating wildlife habitat away from your yard. Choose native plants, shrubs and trees to provide fruits and seeds to welcome wildlife. By creating an area for wildlife to dine naturally, you may distract them from your operations on the other side of the fence.

If the problem persists, it’s time for some serious deterrence. If you own a chicken coop, raise it several inches off the ground and secure the bottom with metal hardware cloth to discourage entry by rodents and snakes. Survey the area for furry and feathered opportunists before closing coop and barn doors each evening. String up a
random array of crisscrossing wires and streamers over poultry runs to discourage thieving raptors from free-range areas.

A strand or two of electric fencing or a low-to-the-ground hot wire in addition to traditional fencing delivers a memorable jolt to unwanted wildlife (see “WildWays” on page 17).

“Barrier fencing, whether it’s an overhang design that prevents climbing or a buried solution around a pen or coop, helps to exclude wildlife,” recommends Robert Calvert, N.H. Fish and Game’s wildlife damage specialist. “To block creatures that burrow underneath fences, dig a trench 12 inches deep and 12 inches wide around the building or garden. Bend and lay galvanized hardware cloth into the trench and secure the top to the building or fence. Backfill the trench with rip-rap gravel and dirt.”

Traditional fencing may not be enough to restrict access. White-tailed deer can jump up to eight feet, easily scaling most fences, but they are not likely to leap over something both high and wide. When building your fence, slant it outward slightly to confuse the deer’s sense of depth perception.

We are fortunate in New Hampshire to have a diversity of wildlife to enjoy. Each species has its place in the ecosystem, and our little patches of paradise make tempting targets. As my young daughter wisely says: They gotta eat, too. With some thoughtful planning and design, what we create in our yards and farms doesn’t have to become an easy meal ticket for wandering wildlife.
PROTECTING POULTRY FROM PREDATORS

By Marc Sutherland

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