**Ask Dr. Fill**

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**Dear Dr. Fill,**

I have a family of groundhogs who have recently moved onto my property and I’m wondering if there’s a “friendly” way to encourage them to move along as they’ve already chewed off a few plants and I’m afraid they’ll eat everything I try to grow. They are doing so much damage to my plants that I have reached the point where sharing my property with them doesn’t seem possible, as much as I’d like to. I’m happy to share, but I’m afraid that they have no intention of sharing with ME! I don’t want to kill them – and I don’t think I’d be able to carry a trapped one in my car somewhere to release it, so a live trap doesn’t seem practical - but I do want them gone! Any suggestions? **Sincerely, Please Go Away**

**Dear Please Go Away,…** I think we all know that groundhogs don’t just nibble on plants - they devour them. One groundhog can eat nearly a kilogram of vegetation every day! Their favourite foods include apples, berries, carrots, clover, corn, dandelions, basil, beet greens, zinnias, parsley, green beans and lettuce. They can also destabilize the ground by creating a network of tunnels underneath the garden bed. So I understand your frustration.

There are dozens of “home remedy” suggestions kicking around out there. Some may work, some definitely don’t. I consulted with the New Brunswick Department of Agriculture and am happy to share their advice. They say you need to be an “annoying neighbour”! You’ll have to disturb their very sensitive hearing with vibrations in the ground. They suggest that you pound a metal pipe deep into the ground near their tunnel and rig up pieces of metal or wood, like wind chimes, to hit the pipe almost constantly. They say this usually results in them leaving the area in no time at all. It’s worth a try and I hope it works! If not, you might want to try some of these other methods recommended by other “experts”.

Place objects that move and rattle around your vegetable and flowerbeds - Items such as pinwheels and wind chimes can sometimes scare them away from your yard. Put pretty whirligigs around your garden to add a decorative touch that serves a dual purpose or string aluminum pie plates together and tie the string to a post or a tree that is close to the garden they seem to be dining in. As the wind blows they rattle and this will usually scare the groundhogs. It seems that it’s the sound more than the movement that scares them, so don’t rely on movement alone.

 Fences such as chicken-wire fences around you veggie patch can also provide fairly good protection, but you need to remember 2 things. Groundhogs can climb over AND tunnel under fences, so there’s no point in trying to fence them out unless you’re willing to make a gopher proof fence, which isn’t easy! To prevent them from going over your fence, make your fences 3 to 4 feet high, and leave the top foot of chicken wire unattached to the posts. Bend this uppermost foot outwards, away from your garden (sort of like what you see on prison fencing). To keep them from tunneling UNDER, the buried portion of the fence should be bent at a 90-degree angle, 1 foot below the surface, with the bottom of the fence pointing away from the garden. This design discourages burrowing if it is started at the fence line.

As I’ve mentioned, there are a lot of home remedies suggested by people – some may work, many do not! Many are based on a scent that they say groundhogs don’t like. But the scents don’t last long and you’d have to replace the items such as garlic or pet hair fairly often (if they work at all). One that is said to work better than those others is dry blood meal which offers the best of both worlds when you use it around your plants. Its main purpose is a fertilizer, so it’ll help your vegetation grow to its full potential but can also repel groundhogs with its smell. Just remember that it’s a rich source of nitrogen, so don’t use it around plants that would not want extra Nitrogen.

Unlike many other ground-dwelling pests, groundhogs like to burrow in drier dirt. To make your yard less appealing for them to dig through, keep your soil as moderately moist as possible (without running your well dry!). This could be a challenge over the summer when groundhogs are most prevalent and the heat leads to drier grounds. If you don’t want to turn your sprinklers on all the time to cover your entire yard, try hosing down certain areas where groundhogs might burrow, such as near bushes and dense shrubbery. They may decide to move to a neighbour’s yard.

It’s also important to know that prevention is very important when it comes to keeping them away if you convince them to leave now. Try to identify and remove anything that might attract them back to your yard; for example, the fruit from apple trees, ripe berries on the ground, or uncovered compost piles that contain fruit like melons (their favorite!). They also find woodpiles very attractive. Consider a covered compost bin instead of an open pile, and try to harvest your garden regularly and pick up any fallen fruit often.

They are also strongly attracted by the scents of food, so you should make sure your trash cans are properly sealed and aren’t releasing any odours. If you throw out a lot of food scraps, try double bagging these before tossing them directly into the trash can, or the ones at your neighbour’s house may think the grass is greener on your side of the fence!

Cutting down tall weeds and grasses and removing brush piles where groundhogs love to hang out is also really important to prevent their return. Hopefully one of these, or a combination or several, will have them moving along. Just be sure to tell them not to come to my house!!! **Sincerely, Dr. Fill**