PROTECT TREES...

from RABBITS

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PROTECT TREES FROM RABBITS

Trees and shrubs in North Dakota serve effectively to protect farms and homes from wind, to control drifting snow, to beautify the country and to provide food, shade and shelter.

Rabbits are among the animals that are a real hazard to successful tree growth. This circular deals with the protection of trees from rabbits. Other animals — porcupines, squirrels, mice, pocket gophers, deer, livestock and dogs — damage trees, too. For information on this, get a copy of the circular “Protect Trees from Animals”. It is available from your County Extension Agent.

Rabbit Populations

Cottontail rabbits are prolific breeders and can have up to several litters of three to six young per year. Under favorable conditions, heavy population numbers can be attained in a short period of time.

Jackrabbits normally have only one litter of two to seven young per year. Because of this lower breeding rate, jackrabbit numbers do not fluctuate as rapidly as the cottontail.

Damage Caused by Rabbits

Rabbits feed on almost any variety of tree and shrub, and under starvation conditions hardly any plant escapes them. The damage to trees is of three kinds: (1) Cutting down of small trees, (2) girdling of trees up to 3 inches in diameter, (3) pruning of twig ends.

When evergreens, especially pine or spruce, are cut down, it usually results in killing the tree. With hardwoods, this cutting down of the young tree forces sprouting and results in a many-stemmed tree. With grafted fruit trees, it results in the destruction of the valuable grafted variety.

Girdling of the trees has the same destructive effect as does the cutting down. In this case, the top is killed, but left standing.

Cutting back of the trees does little, if any, permanent damage, but it does make the plant take longer to grow to a desired size, and spoils its appearance.
Methods of Preventing Rabbit Damage

Rabbit damage can be prevented by either reduction of rabbit numbers; protecting individual trees with mechanical barriers; or by the use of repellents.

Reducing Rabbit Numbers

It is always a good precaution to check with your local state game warden about laws covering the hunting, trapping, or poisoning of rabbits before any action is taken. Laws vary from state to state, and may vary from year to year in any one state.

Hunting

Hunting of rabbits through organized drives is one of the quickest and surest ways to control rabbit populations in a given locality. In the case of cottontails, a systematic “beating of the bushes” has to be done. They like to live and hide in brush-covered draws, wooded areas, uncultivated fence rows, brush piles and in holes and protected areas of embankments and rough broken land. Rabbits literally have to be flushed out.

Jackrabbits live pretty much in the open and are more easily flushed out. Rabbits shot in these drives need not be wasted. Cottontails are good eating. Jacks, in winter, usually bring a good price as fur and as mink food. They are also good eating.

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Figure 1.—Details of a Wellhouse rabbit trap.
Traps

Trapping is a slow method of reducing rabbit numbers, but is about the only method available to city dwellers. Best results are obtained during the period from September through April.

Some of the more effective traps are "Hav-a-hart", "figure 4" and Wellhouse. Plans for the construction of a modified Wellhouse trap can be obtained from your County Extension Agent.

Poisoning

Strychnine-poisoned oats can be used to thin down rabbit populations in isolated areas. (Strychnine is a deadly poison, handle carefully, and place only in safe locations.)

In fall and winter, poisoned grain is placed a spoonful at a time along the potential or existing travelways. In summer, when domestic stock or other animals may be present, it may be well to place the bait in bait boxes that are securely staked down or under piles of brush. Best results are obtained if the poisoning is done before winter snows come.

Snaring

Snaring is an effective way to catch snowshoe hares in the winter. A snare made of No. 2-12 strand picture wire has given excellent results. Make a slip loop with a 4-inch diameter noose at one end. Hang this noose just barely above the snowshoe hare trail. The other end should be fastened firmly to an anchor such as a branch or stake.
Mechanical Barriers

Where only a few trees are involved, they can be protected by fencing individual trees or by wrapping each tree with burlap, plastic film, aluminum foil, or heavy waterproof wrapping paper.

To fence individual trees, make a cylinder of 1/2-inch mesh fencing around the tree. Bury the lower end of the cylinder at least 2 inches into the ground. It should be high enough so that it is at least 2 feet above the expected snow level or up to the branches. Put in 1-inch spacers between the tree trunk and the fence, so the rabbit can't gnaw on the bark.

Wraps of burlap, plastic film, aluminum foil, or heavy waterproof paper can be wrapped around the tree trunk covering an area similar to that protected by the wire. Remove these wraps in the spring before warm weather sets in.

Repellents

Repellents are paint type materials normally painted or sprayed on the trees or shrubs. The repellent contains one or more chemicals that are distasteful to the rabbit. Effective repellents do a good job under normal conditions, but when other food is very scarce, rabbits will eat on repellent-treated trees instead of starving.

Repellents are usually applied in the fall before freezing weather sets in. The trees should be treated from the ground line up to a height of 2 or more feet. Where practical, apply above the reach of the rabbit. If the repellent is to be painted on, an ordinary paint brush can be used. If spraying is to be done, then one of the small hand-pressurized sprayers will work satisfactorily. Wash the sprayer immediately after use. Many effective repellents are on the market. The following is a partial listing of effective repellents:
Z.I.P. (10% ZAC with an adhesive.) A water base repellent recently improved for better overwinter durability.

**Peter Rabbit Repellent** – A copper oleate-rosin-alcohol mixture that can be applied in below freezing weather.

**96-A** – A repellent available from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pocatello, Idaho.

**Dupont’s Arasan 42-S; Arasan 75; TAT-GO; SELCO, Rabbit and Deer Repellent; and Magic Circle** all contain TMDT (Terramethylthiuram disulfide). To be effective, the formulations should contain at least 7-1/4 per cent of TMDT. A “sticker” should be added to the Arasan formulations for longer residual protection.

**Black Leaf-40 (sold as an insecticide)** – To 1 gallon of asphalt water emulsion, add 2-1/2 gallons of water and 1 pound of household detergent (powdered soap). Mix until smooth. Add 3 pints of Black Leaf-40 and mix thoroughly. Spray or paint on the tree. CAUTION – Black Leaf-40 is nicotine sulfate and is poisonous. Use with care. Asphalt water emulsion can be purchased from most building and paint supply dealers.

This list of commercial products implies no endorsement by the authors. Undoubtedly there are other good products but are unknown to us at this time. Additional information on rabbit control may be secured from your local County Extension Agent, the Extension Forester, NDSU, Fargo, North Dakota, or the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 601 Capitol Building, Bismarck, North Dakota.

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**Figure 4.** – Over winter rabbit damage to a Siberian pea shrub (caragana). Some branches are stripped of bark, others are cut back.

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