

## Happy Pocket Gopher Day by Alexis Halstead, UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener

In light of the recent celebration of Groundhog Day, let us consider our local subterranean rodent, the pocket gopher. Although our version may not stick his head out of the ground to cast a shadow, we know he's down there. Every gardener can relate a woeful story of what gophers have done to his or her beloved plants. In my Master Gardener information booth experience, the question most frequently asked is, "what can I do to control gophers?"

According to the UC Agriculture and Natural Resources Pest Notes number 7433, "Pocket Gophers," (available on line at [www.ipm.ucdavis.edu](http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu)) there are several approaches to gopher control, each with its challenges and limitations. Bubblegum, chewable laxatives and other folk remedies are not on the list because they have not been shown as effective by UC Davis laboratory tests, but feel free to try them; I know I'm tempted, and I wonder if one would cancel out the effect of the other.

Below are some methods that **are** recommended by the University of California:

**Trapping.** Traps for public consumption are available at local hardware stores. Success in using traps depends upon the gardener's ability to locate a main burrow by probing the soil near signs of recent activity. A section of the burrow is dug up and two traps facing opposite directions are inserted. After the burrow and traps are covered with soil, the gopher, regardless of which way he approaches, will, theoretically, run into one of the traps and be dispatched. Many people have become adept at this process and some keep track by carving notches in their shovel handles or displaying the tiny hides on their garden sheds. Personally, after several attempts in my own garden all I captured was one little foot...sad, and the victim probably revenged the amputation by gnawing on my plants even when he wasn't hungry.

**Baiting.** In this case, "baiting" does not refer to placing a worm on a hook; it involves handling and storing a highly toxic substance: usually strychnine-laced seeds or grain. As with trapping, the main burrow must be located and opened. The bait is then poured or injected with a bait applicator into the burrow and covered. Care must be taken to avoid spilling the bait outside the burrow so that children and pets do not come in contact with it. It is important to follow the handling instructions.

Another option is to hire a pest control service licensed to bait your gophers for you. Look under pest control services in the Yellow Pages. The one I am familiar with baits his customers' gardens monthly for \$130 a visit. (Please see the UC IPM Pest Note "Hiring a Pest Control Company" at <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74125.html> or call the Master Gardener office at 209.533.5696 for a copy.)

**Exclusion.** Exclusion generally refers to creating barriers between your plants and the gophers. Above ground planters or garden boxes with half-inch hardware cloth lining the bottom provide an efficient way to foil subterranean invasions.

A more labor-intensive approach is needed for in-ground planting. In this case, the root ball of each plant is protected by its own individual wire mesh basket. Ready-made baskets are available at most nurseries. However, if you are protecting more than one or two plants, a less expensive approach is to construct your own gopher baskets. Three-quarter-inch mesh poultry wire makes good basket material easily cut with tin snips and shaped.

A piece of poultry wire 36" by 14" formed over the bottom of a five-gallon bucket will make a basket good for a one-gallon plant. Dig a hole as deep as the soil in the one-gallon plant pot and as big around as the five-gallon bucket. Invert the bucket and wrap the piece of wire around it. Allow half of the width of the wire to extend past the bottom of the bucket and fold it over, forming the bottom of the basket. The basket will fit nicely in the hole dug to fit the bucket. Fill in any voids between the basket and the side of the hole. Set in the plant, surround with soil, water in and roll any wire extending above the ground in toward the stem or trunk of the plant. The plant roots can grow protected within the cage for several years. Over the years, the basket will weaken and the trunk and roots of a tree or larger shrub may break through the basket but by then your plant will be less susceptible to death from gopher munching.

I find the one-time basket construction and placement task a lot less work than dealing with traps or bait every time there is gopher activity in the garden - which seems to me to be pretty constant. And, in case you can still feel compassion for a critter that devours your favorite plants, a basket may frustrate the heck out of a gopher but it won't maim or kill him. Who knows, if all of your plants are protected, the gophers may eat your weeds instead.

*Alexis Halstead graduated from the Tuolumne County Master Gardener training class in 2008. She practices oak-friendly gardening and constructs her own gopher baskets.*



