



**Gophers by the Yard:
or
How My Garden Went to Pot(s)
by Celia Kea**

My grandfather was the sweetest, gentlest soul you could ever meet. But don't talk to him about gophers! This pacifist spirit would sit up all night with a shotgun just to protect his corn, admittedly the SWEETEST you ever ate!

Growing up in the Bay Area suburbs, I hadn't lived with gophers in my garden. When I took over caring for what is now family property, I set about designing my garden irrigation in ignorant bliss. The clay soil seemed perfect for a system of trenches for deep watering. It was a thing of beauty when I was finished and I had burned a lot of calories. I got to burn many more calories every time the little critters tunneled through. Again and again.

The yard I have now was created by pushing back the oaks and brushy undergrowth 20'-30' from the house. When I look up, only about 25% of the sky is unobstructed. When I look down, there's not a flat spot to be found. First I fenced it. Then I raked it. Then I planted it. Then I watched the gophers eat it.



Plan B: POTS! Broken buckets, or anything else that will hold dirt. Large plastic tubs with cracks are reborn as tomato planters. Light blue kiddie pools become excellent homes for squash, peppers, eggplant, or herbs. I put a hole on the SIDE at the bottom. This keeps the hole accessible for cleaning. I fit together a couple of PVC fittings, one inside and one outside, to "finish" the hole and keep it from ripping. My soil is half sand. This allowed me to fill the "pots" with my own soil, using little amendment. Even after all the rain this year, they are not soggy. My "cover crop" of alyssum is doing well. And my Thai garlic has emerged. Large nursery pots line my back fence. Some hold fruit and landscape trees I started from seed (always experimenting). Others are my summer garden space.



Now I have added Plan C, digging out a bed and laying down aviary wire. Since I am a renter it seemed a big investment. But then I've been here eight years so far. The physical toll was far greater than the financial expense. I dug a trench across the narrow end of the bed about 12" deep, laid down one end of the wire, then used the next row of dirt to fill in the first row. Like turning a bed, adding the step of laying wire, unrolling it as you go.

It was worth it! I knew the gophers couldn't chew through from underneath, at least not right away. I did wonder if they might go over ground at night to graze. They didn't. Strawberries, peppers, tomatoes, basil, all kinds of things found safety there.

Another idea I might use to gopher-proof the pathways is laying down old carpet. When I first saw this technique...let's just say I was not impressed. Tacky. I don't want to invest too much into what isn't mine. But I did just twist my ankle in a gopher hole the size of a basketball. They come up anywhere, anytime. Old carpet is free. It is soft on the feet. It covers gopher holes, maybe even deters them. Get an earth tone and it blends into the ground. Instead of raking the leaves, just sweep. It helps prevent erosion problems.

Before people developed agriculture, gophers were turning the soil. Now that we're here, I just wish they'd give it a rest!

Celia Kea graduated from the Master Gardener training program in April, 2009. She has a degree in botany.

For more information about gopher control, go to
<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7433.html>