What's Eating the Tomatoes?
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So you have an unwanted visitor in your garden. It is eating your precious new vegetation and even snacking on your painstakingly placed irrigation piping! And it is stealthy and crafty, for you have yet to witness it sneaking through the garden fence. If you wait long enough, it may become bold enough that you will see it entering and exiting, not unlike Superchuck, the hefty and intelligent groundhog adversary from William Alexander's gardening memoir, "The $64 Tomato." So what can you do to save your precious tomatoes from your version of Superchuck? Try this simple pest management strategy, applicable to vertebrate pests of all kinds.

Number one: properly identify the pest. Do you see plugged mounds of dirt around? Horseshoe-shaped mounds belong to gophers and conical mounds belong to moles. Nope, all you see are open holes. Ah-hah! You have voles! They are usually dark gray or brown in color, measure about four to six inches long and dig shallow burrows. They leave well-worn trails above ground, often littered with fecal pellets. They will cause damage like girdling stems, eating vegetation and will even gnaw on irrigation piping. Their population cycles have eruptive growth patterns that are unpredictable, so if voles are disrupting your garden, consider dealing with the problem pronto; if you procrastinate, you just might end up with an epidemic on your hands.

Number two: assess your options for managing your pest. There are several things to consider in this step. First, just how bad is the infestation? Is it bad enough to warrant control? Second is timing. The time of year matters because for every pest there is an optimal time to deal with it or to implement the most effective use of a particular control method. Third, what are the costs for different potential treatments? Fourth, are endangered species potentially present in your area? And lastly, what control options are available? These may include biocontrol, habitat modification, exclusion, trapping, burrow fuming, baiting, repellent, frightening or even shooting.

For voles in particular, a few of these strategies are effective. As noted in the Vole Pest Note at http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7439.html the simplest and least invasive is to modify the voles' habitat by keeping vegetation low and consider adding fencing and tree protectors. If you want to trap the voles you can use kill traps or live traps, but keep in mind that with the latter you must euthanize the vole after capturing it; the most humane methods of doing so include a carbon dioxide box or shooting. The type of kill trap most commonly used for voles is the snap trap. Place two traps, baited with peanut butter or cotton, by the hole and surround with two halves of PVC piping so the vole only has two ways to go over the trap. Certain toxic baits can be used to eradicate voles. Anticoagulants can be applied as spot (localized) applications (in a small area, not piles which encourage other animals to eat it); broadcast over a larger area, which has less of a probability of secondary overdose by predators; or in bait stations in which the bait (toxin) is kept away from other animals. Zinc phosphide can be

applied as spot or broadcast applications. Most of these types of acute toxins are restricted materials and some, like bromethylin have no antidote for pets. If you do choose to use a toxic bait, read and follow the product's instructions carefully. We do not recommend using these toxins if you have pets or children around your yard.

Number three: implement the management action you deem most appropriate. Habitat modification in combination with snap traps is usually quite an effective control strategy when dealing with invasive voles.

Number four: monitor for effectiveness and to assess potential re-infestations. Watch for the signs of vole activity, now that you know what to look for. Did your control method work? Do you need to try again or try a different method? Or if you were successful, practice vigilance to keep this, and other, vertebrate pests at bay, for the sake of your beautiful garden, or as Mr. Alexander so eloquently points out, your sanity.

Our next free, three-hour class will be held on Saturday, July 9 and will cover "Garden Bugs – The Good, the Bad and the Ugly". The class begins at 9:00 a.m., and will be held in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.org/mgnews-edc. You can also find us on Facebook.

Do you have 1-gallon plant containers to recycle? Master Gardeners will gladly take them at the Master Gardener Office. Please call first to alert them you are coming and thank you for passing them on.