



Betwixt and Between

Labor Day weekend in the garden always finds me uncertain. Technically, it's still summer, and summer is definitely still in evidence: Someday Pond is still showing the effects of long hot days, with a broad collar of mudflats surrounding its still, murky water. Bedraggled phlox blooms pink despite its mildewed leaves (par for the course this time of year); zinnias and bright orange marigolds are competing for dominance; the dahlias are finally beginning to open. Still, something has changed. Evenings have gotten cooler, even chilly, and oppressive humidity has been replaced by crystal blue skies. Yellow leaves are starting to mix in with the green.

And so I start to take stock of another gardening year. In what passes for my vegetable garden, I can cut fistfuls of basil and parsley, though the cilantro bolted early in the heat and then succumbed to insect predation. I'm only beginning to pick tomatoes, but I don't know if they've been unusually slow this year or are simply being stolen as soon as they start to turn pink. Certainly, I and three highly aggrieved cats have watched legions of squirrels scamper across the deck with mouths full of fresh produce. I'm daily checking the progress of a single small watermelon, and wondering how I'll know it's ready to harvest. No apples: every single one disappeared, green, as soon as it reached a few inches across.

But the squirrels aren't the only villains in this story. Yesterday a friend said, "Last year we had moles, and finally had them trapped and taken away. Now we have voles eating the perennials. What should we do?" Good question, Alan. It immediately brought to mind the golf ball-sized holes visible here and there across my lawn and garden, which I had quite successfully ignored up to that point. Moles and voles: proof that you don't have to be invasive to be a nuisance.

What's the difference? First and foremost, diet: moles are tiny carnivores, eating grubs, worms, and insects, while voles are mostly vegetarian. The wider tunnels of moles, pushed up along the way and terminating in little 'volcanoes' of soil, are more unsightly in your lawn, but they may actually improve its health by keeping in check some of the more troublesome pests. Moles may even eat Asian jumping worms, though probably not enough to make much of a dent in their population.

The voles wear pathways between food sources and their burrows, and their habit of eating roots, stems, bulbs, and tubers, is a more direct threat to your plants. Case in point: I planted two blueberry bushes a few feet apart last fall. One is thriving. The other, closer to a telltale golf ball-sized hole, is dead.

Both critters can carry diseases, or at least the fleas and ticks responsible for spreading such horrors as Lyme disease, hanta virus, rabies, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and even the plague—reason enough to want them gone, even if they didn't do any other damage. But, since voles do more outright damage, I'll focus on them.

Generally, it's preferable to deter pests than have to try to eradicate them. You can try mechanical barriers, such as quarter-inch metal mesh, all around a garden bed, but to be effective it will have to extend at least a foot below the soil. When you locate a tunnel, fill it in with soil and tamp it down. Since voles spend more time above ground than moles, they need cover, so remove weeds and mulch to make the space open and less safe. Encourage natural predators to visit your yard: dogs and cats if you're timid, coyotes, foxes and snakes if you're desperate.

There are lots of repellents available, and each has people who swear by it. If you lack coyotes, sprinkle bottled coyote urine instead. Concoctions of garlic 'tea,' hot pepper spray, coffee grounds, and castor oil all emit strong odors that encourage voles to relocate. So will a nearby stand of mint. Some sources recommend machines that emit disruptive soundwaves, but opinions vary on their effectiveness.

There are many plants voles are known to dislike and avoid; the more you include, in theory, the less likely the voles are to spend time in your gardens. Some favorites are members of the allium family (onions and garlic, as well as the decorative varieties); fritillaries, hyacinths, and camassia; iris, salvia, thyme, daffodils, marigolds, and castor beans. The beans contain ricin, one of the deadliest poisons known and a favorite of KGB assassins, so it ought to be effective against a furry mammal only three inches long!

The last resort, and one I hope you won't consider, is commercial poison. Once poison enters the ecosystem, it will be equally lethal for beneficial insects, songbirds, harmless small animals, and any predator unfortunate enough to sample it, including hawks and eagles (not to mention your pets and small children). Better to share some of your harvest than broadcast death.