

Managing Gophers

Introduction

Pocket gophers are burrowing rodents that can cause a great deal of damage to vegetation, buried cables, dikes, and plastic irrigation pipe. Unlike moles, pocket gophers feed almost exclusively on plant material below and occasionally above ground.

There are six species of pocket gopher in the Pacific Northwest. Most are 5 to 6 ½ inches long with a 2- to 3-inch tail. Fur usually is brown or grayish and the typical rodent's buck teeth are easily visible. The name pocket gopher comes from the external, fur-lined cheek pouches on each side of the mouth that are used for transporting food to storage areas.

Gophers form mounds as they dig tunnels and push the loose dirt to the surface. Typically mounds are crescent or horseshoe shaped when seen from above. The hole, which is off to one side of the mound, usually is plugged. By contrast, mole mounds are usually taller and volcano-shaped with no obvious plug.

Pocket gophers live in a burrow system that can cover an area that is 200 to 2,000 square feet. The burrows are about 2 ½ to 3 ½ inches in diameter. Feeding burrows usually are 6 to 12 inches below ground, and the nest and food storage chamber can be as deep as 6 feet. Gophers seal the openings to the burrow system with earthen plugs. Short, sloping lateral tunnels connect the main burrow system to the surface; gophers create these while pushing dirt to the surface to construct the main tunnel.

Options for Control

Pocket gophers may be controlled any time of the year, but control using traps or baits is most successful when new mounds are appearing, usually in the spring and fall. Both traps and toxic baits are effective.

- Several styles of pocket gopher traps are widely available and easy to use. You can set them in the lateral tunnel leading to a mound, but they are more effective when set in the main run. Locate the main run by probing a foot or so away from a mound. For detailed instructions on how to locate a burrow, see *Meadow Voles and Pocket Gophers: Management in Lawns, Gardens, and Croplands*, available free online at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog>. Place two traps back to back in the deep run and stake them down. Relocate the traps if a catch is not made within 2 or 3 days.
- Baiting is another option. Place toxic baits in main tunnels according to label directions. Locate the tunnels with a probe and place the bait down the probe hole. An alternative method is to excavate the tunnel with a trowel and place the bait directly in the run. Bait each burrow system in two or three places for best results. Check the area periodically for 2 weeks after treatment and dispose of any carcasses you find. Failure to follow all label directions carefully can lead to injury to non-target animals, pets, or children. Use them as a last resort.

- Fumigants, sometimes called “gopher gassers”, seldom are effective unless the soil is saturated with water or consists of dense clay.
- Exclusion with underground fencing might be justified for valuable ornamental shrubs or landscape trees. To protect existing plantings, bury hardware cloth or ¾-inch mesh poultry wire at least 2 feet deep with an additional 6 inches of mesh or wire bent at a 90-degree angle away from the planting. This method is not perfect, however, because persistent gophers can burrow below the wire; also, the wire can restrict and damage root growth of trees.

You can protect small areas such as flower beds by complete underground screening of the bed’s sides and bottoms. When constructing raised vegetable or flower beds, underlay the soil with wire to exclude gophers. To protect individual plants, install wire baskets, which you can make at home or buy commercially, at the same time you are putting the plants into the ground. If you use wire, use one that is light gauge and only for shrubs and trees that will need protection while young. Leave enough room to allow for the roots to grow. Galvanized wire provides the longest-lasting protection. Six to eight inches of coarse gravel one inch or more in diameter around underground sprinkler lines or utility cables also can deter gophers.

- Natural controls by predators, including owls, snakes, cats, dogs, and coyotes, may reduce the population of gophers but might not be sufficient.
- Pocket gophers easily can withstand normal garden or home landscape irrigation, but you sometimes can use flooding to force them from their burrows, exposing them to predators.
- Many devices claim to frighten pocket gophers—including vibrating stakes, ultrasonic devices, and wind-powered pinwheel. However, these rodents don’t frighten easily, probably because of their repeated exposure to noise and vibrations from sprinklers, lawnmowers, vehicles, and people moving about. Other ineffective control methods include placing chewing gum or laxatives in burrows in hopes of killing gophers.

Additional information

The following are just a few of the many available resources:

OSU Publications available online at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog>

Meadow Voles and Pocket Gophers: Management in Lawns, Gardens, and Croplands PNW 627E
Sustainable Gardening EM8742

Master Gardener™ advice

- Call Home Horticulture Helpline: 503-655-8631 (Clackamas County), 503-821-1150 (Washington County), or 503-445-4608 (Multnomah County).
- For 10-Minute University™ handouts and class schedule, visit www.metromastergardeners.org.
- Look for Master Gardeners at area Farmers’ Markets.

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