

COASTAL GARDENER
Franklin Laemmlen, Ph.D.

Q: I live in a rural area. I have a problem with ground squirrels – “hundreds of them,” and the problem is getting worse. I do not like to use poison baits. Are there other ways to manage ground squirrels?

A: Your squirrel problem is about to get even worse! Ground squirrels reproduce once a year and give birth in the spring. So within the next few months your squirrel population could more than double if controls are not implemented. There are several kinds of kill traps or live-catch traps on the market. If a live-catch trap is used, you still have to dispose of the live squirrel in the trap. Either kind of trap should be set on the ground near burrow entrances or where there is current squirrel activity. A sufficient number of traps, about one trap per every four to five active burrows should be employed. The traps should be baited with food which is familiar to the squirrels in the area. Food items such as walnuts, almonds, oats, barley, melon rind, fruit or orange slices usually work well. The traps should be baited but not set for several days, so the squirrels learn to come to the free food without fear. On the third or fourth day set the traps. Once set, the traps should be checked twice a day. Bodies should be removed, the trap rebaited and reset. If live-catch traps are used, be aware that it is illegal to release trapped squirrels on another property. To do so risks the spread of disease and may create a pest problem wherever the squirrel(s) is released.

DO NOT handle squirrels with your bare hands, always use disposable gloves, and bury or dispose of the squirrels in a manner that does not create a problem for someone else.

Fumigation is another control method. Fumigation is most effective in the spring or at other times when soil moisture is high. An advantage to fumigation is that the squirrels die in their burrows, which then act as a burial site as well. Some fumigants require a use permit from the Agricultural Commissioner’s office. Hence, make sure you read labels, follow instructions and acquire permits as required.

Squirrel burrows often have several entrances. Make sure to treat and/or seal all entrances for best results. Also do not fumigate when squirrels are hibernating (winter) or aestivating (summer) because squirrels plug their burrows with soil during these times.

A third management practice is to encourage biological control. Many predators, including hawks, eagles, rattlesnakes, gopher snakes, wildcats, coyotes, and weasels eat ground squirrels. Usually predators alone are not able to keep squirrel populations below levels at which they are no longer a pest. Predators can be successful in slowing the invasion of squirrels into marginal habitats where plant cover is not abundant. Dogs may also help reduce squirrel activity in small areas. If you would like a complete and detailed discussion of ground or tree squirrels, contact the Coastal Gardener.

Send your landscape and garden problems to: **The Coastal Gardener, 624-A West Foster Road, Santa Maria, CA 93455.**