

Keeping squirrels from destroying glorious gardens

- Victor Yool
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Q: I live in a second-floor condo and am an active container gardener. I am plagued by squirrels eating my plants (I assume they are tree squirrels as there is no place to burrow here). I don't mean they're eating fruit or nut trees -- they are eating my pansies, lobelia and Iceland poppies! They're biting flowers off and ruining my garden!

I've tried red pepper spray and fox urine. I tried putting CDs in the planters (so the metallic flash would scare them away). I even tried scattering clumps of cat hair around plants (yuck) in the hope that the smell would deter them.

Nothing has worked. Can you please advise and save my garden?

Another reader writes: This morning when I went out on my front porch I found, for the umpteenth time, part of a potted plant uprooted. In the past few weeks I found a plant on a shelf knocked over, and other potted plants have some soil dug up and strewn about. I also found a half-chewed cherry tomato on a railing. I suspect this is the work of one or possibly more squirrels. What can I do to discourage this?

A: In second grade, little Dr. Hort moved across the street from the Berlands, Norma and Bill, highly accomplished gardeners who quite literally lived in a rose-covered cottage surrounded by a white picket fence. Married for more than 50 years, they were still on their honeymoon. Bill constructed some elaborate window boxes of Norma's design and hung them underneath the windows across the front of the house.

Artfully planted with lushly flowering annuals, the window boxes were things of great beauty widely admired in the neighborhood, until squirrels decided to treat them as their personal potager. Squirrels had never plagued the Berland garden before, possibly because of Lulu, a Persian cat of immense size with appetite to match, who regularly patrolled the grounds. But there was no way lardy Lulu could get sufficiently airborne to launch herself into the window boxes, so the squirrels were safe there, and they dined and dug with great vigor.

Bill tried a number of things to send the squirrels packing, but mothballs were what worked best. He put one mothball right on top of the soil in each corner of the window box, plus a couple more in the center of the longer boxes, and the squirrels soon relocated to easier pickings at the Flint's up the street, off Lulu's turf.

Another option is called Critter Ridder. It's produced by the Havahart people (their motto: "Caring control for pets and wildlife"). It's granules made mostly of oil of black pepper, capsaicin and related capsaicinoids that can be used indoors (is Puff burying little treasures in the Boston fern again?) or outdoors, according to the label, to repel skunks, groundhogs, dogs, cats, squirrels and raccoons. Just sprinkle Critter Ridder around the plants you are trying to protect (wear gloves, just as when dealing with hot peppers in the kitchen).

One application can last as long as 30 days. Dr. Hort has no experience with this product, but the Havahart people have an excellent track record, so why not give it a go? Beats breaking out the recipes for Brunswick stew.

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