

Woodchucks: Habits and Control

Norman L. Gauthier

Cooperative Extension Educator, Entomologist

Woodchucks can be a significant nuisance on containerized ornamentals in the field. Growers who produce garden mums and other herbaceous perennials know this first hand. This article was reprinted from the Grower July 1991, Vol. 91-7:6-7.

The woodchuck, or groundhog (also known as the whistle pig), is a member of the squirrel family. It has a compact, hefty body, short, strong legs with long, curved claws on the forefeet for digging and a short tail. It is heavily furred and dark brown in color, weighs from five to ten pounds and is 16 to 20 inches long. Although they are slow runners, woodchucks are alert and quickly move into their dens when alarmed.

Life History and Habits

Woodchucks hibernate during the winter, becoming active in late February and March. Mating occurs in March, and a single litter of two to four young is produced annually. The young are weaned by late June or early July and soon thereafter strike out on their own—usually occupying old, abandoned dens. The numerous new burrows which appear during the late summer are dug by older chucks. Woodchucks are active during the daylight hours. Their range is 50 to 100 feet from their dens.

The den and burrows are extensive and may be used for several years. Burrows may be as deep as five feet and up to 60 feet in length. Woodchucks seem to prefer to construct

burrows on or near farm land where crops grow. They frequently may be found in woodlands or abandoned farm lands and occasionally in urban areas where the combination of food and cover provides a satisfactory habitat.



Woodchucks are voracious feeders. In the early morning and evening periods of the summer, woodchucks actively feed on succulent, green vegetation. They are storing body fat in preparation for hibernation during late fall, usually near the end of October or early November.

Woodchucks feed primarily on vegetables, trees, grasses and legumes. Their favorite foods include various beans, cole crops, carrot tops, clover, squash and peas. Their gnawing and clawing can kill young fruit trees. Gnawing occurs on the main stems of trees and lower branches close to the burrows and is easily distinguished from vole gnawing by the large size of the incisor teeth marks (1/4 to 3/8-inch wide). Also, their burrowing habits produce mounds of earth and burrow holes that present hazards.

Damage Control

1. **Wire fencing** will help keep woodchucks out of nursery areas and small plantings. Bury the lower edge 10 to 12 inches in the soil to prevent burrowing under the fence. Because woodchucks are good climbers, the fence should be three to four feet high.

2. **Live trapping** is an effective method of reducing woodchuck numbers in a small area. Live traps may be of the homemade type or wire mesh commercial variety. The opening for these traps should be eight inches square or larger. Live traps can be effectively baited with apples, carrots, lettuce or other green vegetables, preferably of the type the woodchucks are already eating. Traps should be placed at the burrow opening at dusk when the animal is in the den, in rows where damage is occurring or other areas the woodchucks frequently travel.

Place guide logs on either side of the path between the burrow opening and the trap to funnel the woodchucks

toward the trap. Check the trap twice daily, and release during the daytime in a nonagricultural area.

3. Rifles with telescopic sights have encouraged the shooting of woodchucks. In recent years, there has been no closed season and no limit on the number of woodchucks to be taken by individual hunters. If safety requirements are satisfied, landowners and their hunting friends can help reduce the number of woodchucks. Even concentrated hunting may not eliminate woodchucks and some of the problems they create. Landowners and hunters should agree on arrangements for hunting. This will aid in reducing woodchucks and damage, provide recreational hunting and avoid unsafe practices in the field. Use of rifles is restricted in some towns. Check with local authorities before hunting.

4. Commercial gas cartridges filled with slow-burning chemicals are available at garden supply stores. These are ignited and placed in the burrows. Then, all entrances are sealed. As the cartridges burn, carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide fills the tunnels and kills the woodchucks. Woodchuck burrows are distinguished by a large mound of excavated earth at the main entrance. There are always two or more entrances to each burrow system. Before using these cartridges, read and follow all instructions and cautions on the label.

5. The poisonous exhaust fumes of an automobile, truck or tractor may be directed into burrows. This is not always economical. In addition, it is often difficult to reach holes on steep hillsides and in hedgerows. Avoid prolonged breathing of fumes. Connect a hose to the exhaust pipe and run it into the burrow. Seal the burrow around the hose to prevent gas from escaping. Run the motor about five minutes with the choke partially out. Remove the hose and reseal the burrow opening. Treat all burrows.

6. No poisons or poisonous baits are registered for woodchuck control in Connecticut.