Protecting Gardens and Landscapes
From Rabbits and Javelinas
By Brian Fullerton and Jean Lewis, Plant Clinic

How do you best deal with two animals that often wreak havoc on our plants -- rabbits and javelinas?

Desert cottontail rabbits are gray with a white cotton ball tail and weigh 1 to 2 pounds. They prefer thick brushy habitat with plenty of hiding places and use burrows made by other animals. Cottontails are seen in the early morning and late afternoon but appear during the day during milder temperatures. These rabbits eat flowers and vegetables but really anything tender and green. If plants seem to almost completely disappear overnight, suspect rabbits or hares. The stems usually appear cleanly clipped off, often at a 45° angle. The tops may be lying on the ground nearby. Some vegetables, such as corn, squash, onions, garlic, artichokes, asparagus, tomatoes, potatoes and peppers are less bothered.

Cottontails also chew the lower portions of woody plants, especially young smooth barked trees such as fruit trees. Bark damage is recognized by side-by-side teeth marks in the wood usually a 1/2 inch or more across.

Rabbits and hares are from different genera, which look similar in many ways. But hares are much bigger, have longer ears with black markings, a grayish-brown coat color, and are less social than the childhood image of the Easter bunny. Jackrabbits are true hares and are nocturnal.

Deterring rabbits and jackrabbits:

Exclusion: Use mesh wire hardware cloth or 1” or smaller mesh chicken wire available at hardware and garden outlets. Set the wire fencing at least 2’ (3’ for jackrabbits) above the soil and a few inches below the soil line, and anchor firmly. Either rebar or metal pipe make strong posts, whereas wood stakes are weaker and deteriorate quickly in the desert. Bending a few inches of the fence bottom outward will further deter rabbits from digging beneath it. Plastic netting is less expensive than wire mesh, but far weaker and can trap birds and reptiles. Tree guards or wraps can be purchased to protect tree trunks if cylinders of hardware cloth are not used.
**Plant Selection:** Use plants that rabbits and hares don't like to eat to make your garden area less attractive, but if a drought hits, they will eat ordinarily unpalatable plants to survive. A list of resistant vegetables is above and a list of some deer and javelina resistant plants is available at this link, AZ 1237 pdf. See also the Desert Botanical Gardens Rabbit Resistant Plant List.

**Habitat Modification:** Remove cover that rabbits and hares can use to hide by blocking openings, cleaning up piles of debris and removing rock piles where rabbits live and hide.

**Scare tactics** include dogs or cats roaming the yard, moving or light-reflecting objects, and noisemakers such as pie pans, twirlers, lights, fake owls with motion, music or talk.

Rabbit **repellents** release predator odors or make plants taste bad to the rabbits, but they may not be safe for edible gardens (*read labels carefully*). Repellents are readily available at garden centers and home improvement stores. Home-remedy repellents may provide some temporary relief.

**Row covers** on vegetables can also deter rabbits.

We advise against poisons or traps for rabbits and hares.

**Javelinas** or collared peccaries weigh about 40-60 pounds; reach about 19" tall; have short, coarse "salt and pepper" hair; short legs; and a pig-like nose. Javelinas are usually night-foragers and dig up newly planted garden beds and as well as established plants. They also eat bulbs, tubers, cacti, succulents and any plants that drop fruit or nuts. In addition, they are attracted to garbage cans, birdseed, pet food, table scraps, any water including irrigation lines, and moist soil.

**Deterring javelinas:**
They can't climb very high, but they are very strong and heavy animals, so barriers need to be strong.

- Masonry **walls** that are 4’ tall for absolute exclusion.
- Sturdy wrought iron or other metal bar **fencing**, preferably anchored 8” or more in concrete.
• Heavy-weight **woven wire cloth/hardware cloth** (thick enough to resist heavy pressure) or **chain link** that is at least 3’ high and anchored firmly by metal pipe posts and preferably set in concrete.

• Enclose new landscape plants with **hardware cloth** and **rebar stakes** for one year after planting.

• **Electric fences** of single wire about 8” to 10” above the ground.

• Loud **noises** (bang pots, yell, stomp on the floor, etc.); throw small rocks in their direction; or spray with vinegar, water from a garden hose, or large squirt gun filled with diluted household ammonia, 1 part ammonia, and 9 parts water, although avoid spraying in their eyes.

• While javelinas sometimes dig up plants to get water from the roots, consider using landscape plants that javelinas are less likely to eat. See *UA publication AZ1238* and javelina resistant plants.

**SUMMARY**

• Identify the pests that are damaging your garden.

• Understand their life cycle, habits, and food preferences.

• Make the garden less attractive to these animals by reducing their preferred habitat.

• If co-existence is not possible, barriers and other techniques described above may be the best defense.

• Avoid the use of poisons, which kill beneficials as well as the pest, and can leach into your consumable plants, harm pets, and harm people.

**Photos by Jean Lewis**

**Resources:**

• **Backyard Gardener—Desert Cottontail Rabbits**
  https://ag.arizona.edu/yavapai/anr/hort/byg/archive/desertcottontail.html

• **Backyard Gardener--Javelinas**
  https://ag.arizona.edu/yavapai/anr/hort/byg/archive/javelina.html

• **Fencing for Wildlife**
  http://extension.arizona.edu/sites/extension.arizona.edu/files/pubs/az1481h.pdf

• **Pests in Gardens and Landscapes: Rabbits**
  http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7447.html

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