

July 03, 2020  
Rabbits

I enjoy seeing cottontail rabbits in the wild and I try to do conservation practices on my farm to increase their numbers. I know at one time from stories my grandfather told, their numbers were much greater long ago. I spotted 3 cottontails last year, while mowing down unwanted trees in a grass/flower conservation area. That's when I decided to just go mow the trees and let the tall grass remain as cover.

I know that rabbits can also be quite a nuisance. They have adapted well to the urban environment, unfortunately most of what they want to eat is something we want to keep. In snowy winters hungry rabbits will peel the life-giving bark from trees and shrubs. The trees become sacrifices to the animal's survival. Sometimes it is best to wrap young trees and shrubs with 1-inch fencing. The same is true for vegetable and flower gardens. You can exclude rabbits with an 18 to 24-inch-high fence of 1-inch wire mesh.

Repellents can provide temporary protection from damage, but their overall effectiveness varies. Label restrictions on most products suggest you limit use to woody plants during winter months when rabbits are most likely to cause damage. Most repellents are unsuitable for use on garden crops. If the rabbit won't eat it, why should you.

As for me, I long for a good healthy population of rural rabbits. Unfortunately, like so many things in our world we now have another threat to their population. According to the USDA, "rabbit hemorrhagic disease is a fatal disease in rabbits and is classified as a foreign animal disease in the United States. In February 2020, animal health officials detected rabbit hemorrhagic disease virus serotype 2 (RHDV2) for the third time in the United States, since 2018. Since that detection, RHDV2 has spread to multiple states across the Southwest. RHDV2 does not impact human health. Cases of RHDV2 in North America are highly contagious and, unlike other rabbit hemorrhagic disease viruses, it affects both domestic and wild rabbits. Many times, the only signs of the disease are sudden death and bloodstained noses caused by internal bleeding."

This virus is resistant to normal environmental temperatures and has the ability to last in the environment for 3 months. It can even pass through an animal that has eaten an infected rabbit and be found in the fecal material. People can spread the virus indirectly by carrying it on their clothing and shoes.

There is a vaccine for this disease, but it is not available in the US at this point. When and if a vaccine becomes available it will protect domestic rabbits, at a price. But those rascally cottontails will be on their own as another nemesis invades our lives. Someone called it COVID for rabbits. With an over 70% death rate for rabbits, it is far worse than what we face.

Mark Kepler - Purdue Cooperative Extension Service-Fulton County 1009 West Third Street Rochester IN 46975 574 223 3397 <http://www.ag.purdue.edu/counties/fulton/pages/default.aspx>