

Today's column is about some of our feathered, hairy and slimy garden critters. If you remember where the story left off last spring, our flickers had vacated their birdhouse after much destruction to it and the side of our home. They're still visiting our bird feeder. They love the suet and like to poke around on the ground under the bushes near the feeder. They're solitary now though because that's what flickers do in the wintertime. We gave away the second flicker birdhouse to a friend who promised me he wouldn't put it anywhere near his house or any other wooden structures. We're hoping the pointy hammerers find a tree nearby in early spring.

I recently attended a class on native plants sponsored by the Conservation District. Klaus Richter, King County Water and Land Resources, spoke about the animals (other than us) who live in the habitat we provide in our gardens and on our property. It turns out woodpeckers (flickers fall into this category) usually dig out three nesting sites a year with their pointy, strong beaks and then choose one for egg-laying and fledgling rearing. That's why our flickers continued attempting to drill their way into our house even though we provided a perfectly good birdhouse for them.

Our latest small animal visitor is a Douglas Squirrel who keeps running into our garage every time the doors open. He scoots in, leaps onto a storage shelf and runs along a ladder on the wall. We have to leave the garage door open until he exits. I consulted "Squirrels of the West" (Lone Pine Field Guide) by Tamara Hartson. Our noisy, but very cute, squirrel is a Douglas's Squirrel *Tamiasciurus douglasii*. His undersides are tawny-orange, back is chestnut brown, with a dark-tipped tail and a black stripe separating his darker back from his lighter tummy. Our neighborhood has groupings of Douglas fir providing plenty of food and hiding places. He has a habit of leaving piles of cone scales on our deck and railings after he removes the seeds.

Klaus said slugs are an annual, much like the plants they love to munch on the best. The slugs causing the problems in our gardens die during the winter. All the more reason to help them on their way to a happy drunken death in our tins of beer strategically placed throughout our garden plantings in spring, summer and part of fall. Don't forget the "slice and dice" method. It's deadly, quick and sometimes quite satisfying. The point of this paragraph is if you don't see any slugs in your garden now, don't waste your money on iron phosphate or even on the beer traps. Wait until the slugs become active when the weather warms up a bit.

At the Extension Office we've already been getting questions about controlling moles. Moles become most active in February and March during mating. If you have moles it usually means you have quite fertile soil. That's the good part. The bad part is these insectivores can sometimes wreak havoc with lawns and gardens. If you do have to eliminate them find out which tunnel is active by first stomping down the hills. The next day the active hills will reappear. Now you can seek out those pesky moles.

Initiative 713 in Washington State makes it against the law to trap moles unless you use a method that impales them. (Now, how that's more humane than the old trapping methods, I'm not sure. Too bad the moles can't tell us.) Snohomish County Extension has a publication listing "VICTOR Mole Trap, Eaton Answer Mole Trap, Woodstream 0645" as effective and legal to use in Washington State. Initiative 713 is undergoing some redefining particularly in regards to moles. Visit <http://Snohomish.wsu.edu/vertchap.htm#mole> for more information on controlling moles and other pest mammals in home gardens.

We've personally been living rather peaceably with our own moles and slugs. I didn't have to use Sluggo (iron phosphate) at all last year and we've had periodic mole problems for years but I stomp on their runs and they eventually go away. At least I know my soil is fertile. I just think of our moles as mini-rototillers.

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