

To Do List For October 2017

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Now is the time to prepare vegetable beds for spring planting. Add compost, dig in leaves or grow a cover crop to enrich the soil for next year's vegetables. Flatten out any water basins around trees and shrubs so water from rain does not drown the roots. Cover compost bins so rain does not leach out the nutrients in the compost. Remove old summer vegetable plants, and if they are healthy put them in the compost. Clean up the vegetable garden, drain and roll up irrigation hoses, and dispose of any old fallen vegetables and debris.

If you want to have California natives or Mediterranean style plants in your garden next year, fall is the best time to plant them. They will have the advantage of mild fall weather and rains and should be able to develop a good root structure before summer arrives.

We have been hearing a lot about voles (also known as meadow mice) this year; there seems to be a population explosion of these rodents. Voles can be very destructive to ornamental and vegetable gardens as well as to orchards and vineyards.

There are 6 species of voles; the most common in our area are the California and montane vole. Voles have small, heavy and compact bodies with short legs and short furred tails; they have blackish to grayish brown fur and are approximately 5" to 8" long including the tail. They do spend a lot of time above ground, but prefer to be in their burrows or runways. The clearest sign of voles is a well-traveled above ground runway that connects multiple burrows which are 1.5" to 2" in diameter. Voles are active day and night year round, even in the snow.

Voles are herbivores and feed on grasses, bulbs, tubers, garden plants, bark and roots. They will gnaw on the bark of young fruit trees, vines and shrubs, and can girdle the plant and kill it.

The best way to deter voles is by clearing away weeds, heavy mulch and dense vegetation; this removes their protection so they are more vulnerable to predators.

To protect young trees and vines, place a cylinder of sturdy plastic or hardware cloth around the trunk and bury the bottom of the cylinder; for larger specimens, create a clearing 4' in diameter around the plant. Keep shrubs trimmed off the ground if possible and inspect them regularly for damage on the bark. If you have a fence around your garden, place 1/4" wire mesh at least 12" wide above ground and 6" to 10" below ground around the base of the fence to prevent voles from entering.

Trapping with mouse traps can be effective, but the placement of the traps is critical. Put the trap at right angles to the runway with the trigger end in the runway. Remove dead voles with rubber gloves since they carry parasites; bury or place the dead vole in a plastic bag and put it in the trash. Continue trapping until no more voles are caught, then bury the runway and burrow and move the traps to a new location.

Bait can also be effective; use an anticoagulant type whose label states that it can be used for voles and follow the instructions on the container.

Habitat modification, trapping and baiting will help control voles and protect your garden; eventually their populations will decline to more acceptable numbers.