

Raccoon Raiders

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Q. I have raccoons that frequently raid my grapes and orchard. I have tried fencing them out but that does not even slow them down. Do you have any tips for protecting my fruit?

A. Raccoons can be very aggressive pests, getting into garbage cans, eating fruit right off the tree or even climbing into the chicken coop to kill your chickens. They have been known to attack dogs if chased. Fences do not stop them, they go right over (or under) fences, unless they're electrified near ground level and a bit higher. Because they regard humans as providers of food many times they will nest nearby; under the house, in a hollow tree or in a storm drain or street culvert.

The best way to keep raccoons away is to prevent them from ever regarding your address as a food source in the first place. Be careful never to leave pet food out overnight, and to pick up windfall fruit. If your neighbors are feeding them (a real possibility, since they're often considered cute), ask them to please stop, and explain why.

Frighteners (lights, noises, squirted water) don't work for more than a visit or two. You can help keep them out of the house by attaching a chimney spark arrester and by surrounding decks and porches with heavy duty wire. With proof of damage (because they're classed as furbearers) you can hire someone to trap and eradicate them. Don't try it yourself unless you have some experience: they can carry diseases as well as roundworms, transferrable to humans. A big aggressive dog can deter them, but can be injured in the process.

Raccoons can be fenced out by taking an ordinary fence and adding a single electrified strand of wire 8 inches above the ground and about 8 inches out from the base of the fence. A pulsating high-voltage, low-amperage fence charger, such as those used for confining cattle, is used to electrify the fence. A low, two-wire electric fence can be very effective for excluding raccoons from grape vines, sweet corn, melons, and other highly preferred crops. The two wires are fastened on evenly spaced wooden posts; one wire is 6 inches above the ground and the other is 12 inches above the ground. The fence charger needs to be activated only from dusk to dawn. This also works if you are having problems with the raccoons or skunks digging or rolling up the lawn, this type of low electric fence can be installed around the lawn to prevent raccoons from rolling back sod in search of insects or grubs. The

fence is removed once the grubs are gone. Such fences around ponds are sometimes used to protect koi and goldfish from raccoons.

Electrified wire wrapped around the trunk of a tree will also discourage climbing. Another way to protect individual trees is to wrap stovepipe around the trunk up to 4 feet from the ground (it's too slick for them to climb) or attach bird netting to the lower part of the tree and then to the trunk, like an inverted umbrella: they'll avoid getting caught in the netting.