



# Living in the foothills...

Advice from Master Gardeners, Ray and Ruth Conner, Oakhurst, CA

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## Ground Squirrels in the Foothills

The California ground squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) is at home in the foothills where there are areas of bushes, along the edge of a road, or near buildings where the ground has been planted. He likes being where there are fruit or nut trees and gardens. He will invade a garden and eat the seedlings, chew the bark of young shrubs and vines, and eat the young roots. Ground squirrels will gnaw on plastic sprinkler heads and irrigation lines. What a pest!

The brownish gray pest is about 9 inches long with a slightly hairy tail of five to seven inches. He is different from the tree squirrel, who doesn't live in the ground. The ground squirrel may climb a tree when frightened, but will return to his burrow eventually. Ground squirrels are active during the day and feed in an area over 50 yards from the burrow. They can be seen sitting in the sun and chirping their alarm when an enemy is in the area. They are active during the warm days of summer, but hibernate during the cold winter. Burrowing can be quite destructive with burrows being dangerous to people and animals walking or mowing. Burrows beneath buildings may cause structural damage and erosion. These pests can carry infectious diseases such as rabies or bubonic plague.

There are a few ways to control their population depending on the season. For example, fumigation is most satisfactory in the spring when the ground is still moist and the gas doesn't diffuse through the ground but baiting with treated grain is best in the summer and fall. Fumigation is safe if the instructions are followed but there is a fire hazard in the summer in the dry foothills, as the canister has to be lit before being placed in the burrow. Toxic baits using anticoagulants work well in the summer. The anticoagulant bait shows better results but four to five days of eating the bait is necessary to kill the animal. This way, if a ground squirrel has eaten the bait, and then is caught by a coyote, dog, or cat, the predator won't get enough anticoagulant to do it harm. Bait boxes can be made to put the bait in and then placed near the burrow entrance. An easy bait box is two pieces of three-inch PVC pipe 1 1/2 feet long fastened with a PVC right angle connector. Using a bait box will keep the tree squirrels, birds, dogs, and children from getting into the poison. Don't be discouraged if the animals don't disappear right away, for they have to get used to the box being there and it may take over a week for the grain to be eaten. Keep the bait box supplied with fresh grain.

Cleaning up brush piles makes it less desirable for burrows to be hidden under the piles. Natural predators help with control of the ground squirrel population but doesn't do it alone. The final trick is to be vigilant, as the animals will return from your neighbor's yard to occupy the vacant burrows in your yard. Be ready to attack at the first sign of new invaders.

For the California Ground Squirrel Pest Note, visit

<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PDF/PESTNOTES/pngroundsquirrel.pdf>