Do Natural Landscapes Attract Rodents?

- by Becky Riley (October 2000)

Sometimes people to object to natural landscaping on the grounds that natural landscapes, especially those in urban environments, attract or harbor rodents such as Norway rats or house mice. Is there any truth to this belief?

Low, dense groundcovers can create harborage for rodents, especially if there are food and water sources nearby.

In reality, rodent pests are no more attracted to natural landscapes than any other landscape. However, landscapes that are overgrown with blackberries[1] or covered with low, dense, monoculture groundcovers such as English or Algerian ivy can provide harborage for rodents.[2,3] Rodents can also live in wood or brush piles[2,3] or rock gardens.[6] These features can be found in conventional landscapes as well as degraded "natural" landscapes. Undisturbed natural areas or diverse native landscapes that are properly cared for should not attract pest rodents.

Removal of English or Algerian ivy,[1,3] or use of exposed pathways or very low ground-covers to break up large expanses of such dense groundcovers[3] can go a long way toward reducing rodent habitat. Control of blackberries,[1] keeping woodpiles up off the ground,[2,4] and the use of diverse plantings instead of monoculture groundcovers[1] can also reduce potential rodent harborage. Management of food sources that can be controlled (e.g., compost piles, garbage, food, food waste) is another important step to control rats and mice.[3,4] Rats are omnivorous and will eat slugs,[1] berries,[6] and some types of vegetation,[1,6] but improperly managed garbage is the main source of food for rats in most areas.[3,6]

Sources:

1. Personal communication, David Powell (Seattle Parks and Recreation Department), 10/2000; Personal communication, Phil Renfrow (Seattle Parks and Recreation Department), 10/2000.
2. Pehling, Dave. 1999. *Principles of vertebrate pest management*. W.S.U. Snohomish County Extension (draft 04/25), http://snohomish.wsu.edu/vertchap.htm
3. Simon and Quarles. 1996. Integrated Rat Management. *Common Sense Pest Control Quarterly* 12(1):5-15. Berkeley, CA: Bio Integral Resource Center.
4. Olkowski. 1990. Management of the House Mouse. *Common Sense Pest Control Quarterly* 6(4):7-15. Berkeley, CA: Bio Integral Resource Center.
5. EPA. 1998. *R.E.D. Facts Rodenticide Cluster*. Washington, DC: Office of Pesticides, Prevention and Toxic Substances (July).
6. Personal communication, Nancy Cifuentes (Seattle Parks and Recreation Dept.), 10/2000.

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NCAP also offers a factsheet "A rat- and mouse-free house," available on the Web at www.pesticide.org/factsheets.html.