

Rabbit damage to tree plantings

Both cottontail rabbits and jackrabbits can severely damage trees by girdling the trunks or major branches or by completely severing the growing points of terminal leaders on small trees.

Although damage to trees is widespread in years when rabbit numbers are high, it can be significant locally even in years when the rabbit population is low on a statewide basis. Winters of deep snow are usually accompanied by heavier damage. Although tree bark is a major rabbit food only during December to February, considerable amounts of it may be eaten any time from the first killing frost of the fall until mid-April.

Trees Preferred

Of the deciduous trees, those with thin bark such as willows, poplars, and apple are most frequently attacked by rabbits. However, maples and ash are susceptible until they are past the sapling stage of growth. Walnut and oak are generally ignored by rabbits. Among the conifers, pines are definitely preferred over firs and spruce.

Rabbit Evidence

Rabbits may debark a tree from as low as an inch above the soil line or snow line to as high as they can reach standing on their hind legs. Debarked areas should show the marks of the rabbits incisor teeth. On trees of sapling size, the tooth marks will run horizontally since the rabbit must turn its head sideways to bring the teeth into good gnawing position. Sightings of rabbits or their tracks or droppings within a tree plantation should be

reason enough for an inspection of individual trees for signs of gnawing damage.

Preventing the Problem

Cottontail rabbits are creatures of the forest edge and prefer the physical shelter of brushy field borders, fencelines, tall grass, and weeds. Limit this kind of habitat in and adjoining a tree plantation to reduce rabbit use. Burn any tree trimmings and brush cuttings or pile them at least 100 feet away from the plantation.

Hunt your rabbits during the fall or encourage other hunters to harvest them. During the winter when foods are relatively scarce, box traps of wood or wire baited with corn will capture some rabbits. At other times of the year traps for rabbits are not effective.

Fencing is the most effective method of protecting an area from rabbits. Use a fence of chicken wire 36 inches high with several inches buried in the ground. Individual trees can be protected with cylinders of woven or welded wire set so that there are at least two inches between the tree and wire at all points.

Wrapping the trunks of individual trees will discourage rabbit attacks but may be too time consuming for a tree plantation. Commercial tree wrap and heavy aluminum foil are equally effective. Wrap each tree as high as rabbits can reach standing on top of the expected snow cover.

Rabbit Repellents

Repellents will usually protect trees for an entire winter or about two months at other times of the year. They should be applied in the late fall when temperatures are above freezing so that the material will dry on the bark rather than freeze on.

A homemade repellent can be made by dissolving seven pounds of lump rosin in one gallon of alcohol. Apply the mixture to the trunk and low branches of the trees with a paint brush. Commercial rabbit repellents are applied as sprays. The sprayer nozzle should have a medium or large opening to prevent clogging. The following repellents are registered for sale in Iowa and if not available locally can be obtained from the addresses given:

Chaperone Rabbit and Deer Repellent, Sudbury Laboratory, Inc., Sudbury, Mass. 01776

Hopkins Thiram 42-S Fungicide and Repellent, Hopkins Agricultural Chemical Co., Box 7532, Madison, Wis. 53707.

Rabbit Scat, Earl May Co., Shenandoah, Iowa 51601.

Rabbit Rid, Animal Repellents, Inc., 980 Ellicott Street, Buffalo, N.Y. 14209.

Science Rabbit and Deer Repellent, Science Products Co., Inc., 5801 N. Tripp Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60646.

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