

Taking Care of Pests Without Pesticides

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Susan JunFish speaks during a recent workshop at the Hacienda de las Flores.

Photos Ron Whitehurst

“You need a much stronger trap with locking doors that can stop a raccoon,” he added. “In a smaller skunk trap, a raccoon would be able to open the doors with its hands and destroy it.” And he recommended leaving opossums alone. “They may be ugly, but they are like a cleaning crew in your garden and they will eat grubs. They are not too problematic in yards, they don’t even eat fruit, and they’re pretty mellow.”

In 2011, the Town of Moraga caught 95 gophers in three and a half months utilizing Victor Black Hole traps, and in 2012 it caught 57 gophers in two and a half months, according to Moraga Public Works superintendent Dan Bernie. “With proper training, this can be a very effective way of limiting gophers in your lawn,” he said.

Steve Fishbaugh, maintenance operation and transportation director for the Acalanes Union High School District, got rid of about 150 gophers over six months at the local high schools using Cinch traps. “Praise the school district for agreeing to be pesticide free,” commented Papka, “and for agreeing to give me some of their catch to feed my birds.”

“Carbon dioxide is also an alternative to kill gophers,” said JunFish, “but it also kills anything in the burrows including salamanders, burrowing owls, and snakes.”

Another effective way to deal with rodents is with owls. The Town of Moraga set up two owl boxes in local parks, with two nestlings sighted per year. One barn owl nest box houses a family of these beneficial raptors that can consume up to 3,000 rodents per year. “When we clean up the boxes in the middle of November, we find 4- to 5-inch-high stacks of rodent bones,” said Bernie.

Shortly after the presentation, Fishbaugh confirmed that the AUHSD is now

considering installing a network of owl boxes at local high schools so the predators will also dispose of the rodents, thus reducing the amount of needed labor.

“Barn owls require 150 grams of food a night,” explained John Schuster of Wild Wing Company. “That’s three voles or seven deer mice. Great horned owls can extract gophers from their hole because they hunt by sound, not sight.” Schuster added that when babies are born the amount of food needed multiplies. The difficulty is placing the box at the right location on a specific property. “Owls do not hunt directly next to their nest, they cover a wide circle away from it,” said Schuster. “A solution is to have three boxes positioned in a triangle to cover an entire neighborhood.”

New techniques are also available for the tiniest of pests – termites – without having to fumigate the entire house. Chris Garcia from ATCO Pest Control said they use acoustic emissions for termite detection. “Our Termite Tracker detects both dry wood and subterranean termites actively eating and communicating within the galleries of the wood,” he said, adding that the sonic technology can detect very small infestations, with as little as six termites. “We locally treat infested areas by drilling a small hole into the chambers created by the termites. We then inject Premise Foam into the wood, filling the entire chamber and killing the termites. The residual foam is absorbed into the wood, thus preventing any further infestation for approximately two to three years.”

Jon Nelson from Alliance Environmental Services stated that, according to the California Department of Consumer Affairs, the only two effective methods for total, whole-house eradication of termites are fumigation and heat.



James Schmerker with a gopher trap.