

## Gardening Guide for August

# Rats, rattles and voles!

By Cynthia Brian

*“There's a snake lurking in the grass.” Virgil*

**T**en rattles! Diamond pattern on the skin. This was no gopher snake!

I was checking my orchard on the hill agonizing over the gopher mounds when I saw the slithering snake. Excited to know that I had a friend in the rodent business, I quickly ran to get a closer look. Dang! Not a gopher snake but *crotalus oreganus oreganus*-northern Pacific rattlesnake. I was wearing my normal summer gardening gear – shorts, bathing suit top, cowboy hat and boots. Not exactly the suggested outfit for wrangling a rattler. As I was counting the number of rattles, he/she slinked into the rosemary bush bordering my vegetable garden.

It's been over five years since I've witnessed a rattlesnake on my property. According to the experts, because of the wet winter and now the dry summer, rats, mice, gophers and voles are ubiquitous, which means that their hunters are in abundance as well. This season I've had several gopher, garter, and king snakes as wanted guests. Rattlesnakes give me the shivers.

Every summer growing up on our ranch in Napa County meant a meeting with at least 50 or more rattlers. I've stepped on a few in the past and a couple snaked over the top of my boots. Fortunately neither I, nor anyone in my family has ever suffered a bite.

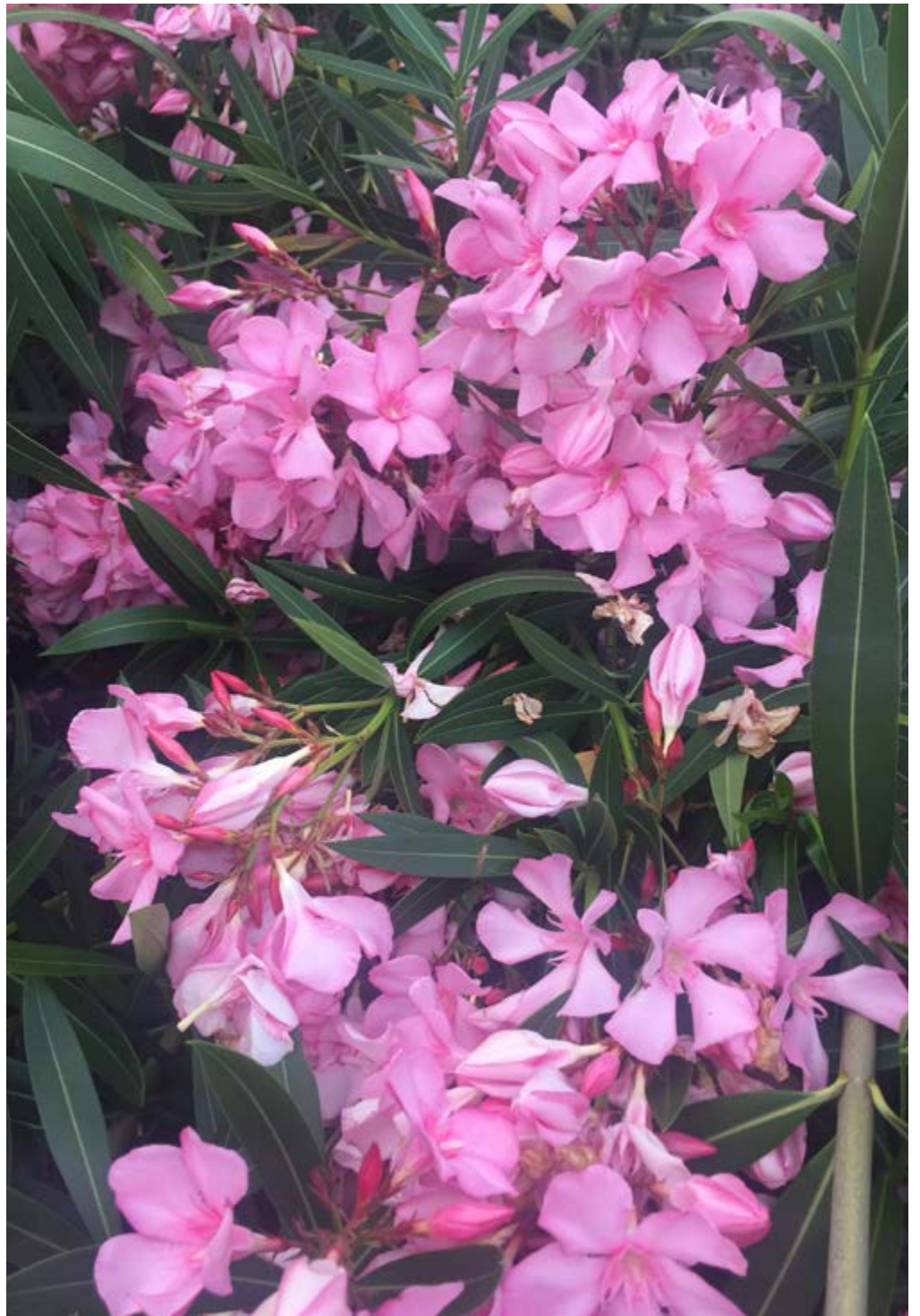
Rattlesnakes are the only pit viper found in California. All are poisonous and potentially dangerous. They kill their prey with their venom as opposed to constriction. Babies are born fully developed with one rattle and are even more potent than adults. The rattles on the end of the snake's tail are used as a warning system, alerting predators or humans to stay away. Every time the snake sheds, a new rattle is grown. Rattles can break off, and to the unaccustomed bystander, a snake without rattles may resemble a gopher snake. Without proper identification, never handle a snake in the grass. Rattlesnakes are not aggressive and don't usually strike unless provoked, however, since they seek warm-blooded prey, a human could be mistaken as food.

Rodents are inundating homes and gardens this year in search of water and food. Wherever rodents race, snakes that eat rodents follow. I discovered a terrific trap that zaps rats and mice dead. It's called The Rat Zapper and it works like a charm.

For gophers, box traps and black hole traps work best. The moles are normally looking for grubs in a lawn and don't do much damage. I just stomp down on their ridges. Voles, also called “field mice” or meadow mice” are bad news as they target the root systems of vegetable gardens, lawns and fruit orchards. They will gnaw at the trunks of trees and shrubs, chew blades and stems of grass, and eat bulbs. They often use empty mole or gopher burrows as their runways. Voles reproduce rapidly leading to mass destructions of landscapes. Snap traps are best to catch these critters when they exit their holes.

The best protection to minimize the rodent infestation is to invite their natural predators – owls, hawks, and yes, snakes. A family of barn owls will hunt and eat up to 1,000 rodents a year. Consider installing a nesting box for owls. The hawks fly with the wind currents to find the rodent restaurant.

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*Oleanders repel gophers and moles.*

*Photos Cynthia Brian*