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## Gopher it! Down-to-earth tips from a rodent-tracker

By Dick Tracy  
Bee Garden Writer

California gophers don't know it yet, but they're in big trouble. The reason I say that is because of a call that arrived on my answering machine from a woman named Sandy Felts who lives in Phoenix, Ariz.

When I returned the call, she answered, "Gopher Getters!" The reason for her call was that someone had given Felts a copy of a 1988 California Life article on trapping gophers with a "Black Hole" trap. "I'm sorry," she began, "but this fella doesn't know what he's talking about. In my opinion, that 'Black Hole' trap is nothing but trouble. Either dogs will dig it up and eat the gopher — which could kill them — or someone will steal it."

One should take into consideration that Felts is not talking about the typical backyard situation, but of her experience as a gopher trapper, which began 23 years ago: "We lived on a farm out in Gila Bend, 'the armpit of America,' and there wasn't much else for kids to do," she laughs. "Dad raised sugar beets, and the gophers just loved 'em."

Felts, who claims to have been catching gophers since she was 3, says the best way is the tried-and-true Victor trap: "The old green ones are a little hard for senior citizens to set," she acknowledges, "but the new stainless steel ones are easier, and they don't rust, either."

As for using wire cages to protect plant roots, Felts scoffs: "If they're hungry enough, they'll chew right through them. (Disheartening news for me, after having lined my tulip beds with chicken wire to keep the varmints from eating them.) And that stuff about feeding them chewing gum to make them bloated and die is just an old wives' tale."

What about gas or bombs? "They're useless and dangerous," Felts says. "We had one guy down here hire a gasoline tank truck to flood the gopher runs in his yard, and now he's wondering why he has to pay for

destroying his neighbor's house. And trying to flood the runs with water will cause more damage to your foundation or pool than to the gophers. One woman tried that and was surprised when she pulled out the hose and found the end all chewed up. I told her she was lucky to get anything back. I've had them eat right through PVC pipe to get water."

Are poison baits effective? "They're really most dangerous to pets and children," Felts says. "People have a hard time believing how smart gophers are, but they'll



**'People have a hard time believing how smart gophers are.'**

— Sandy Felts

take those pellets you put down a hole and sometimes put them outside their runs in a neighbor's yard, or somewhere there might be a dog or small child who eats the poison."

Protecting planting beds by using so-called "gopher plants" (*Euphorbia lathyris*) around the perimeter is useless, Felts testifies. "They hate the taste of marigold roots and won't eat them, but I've heard of cases where tunneling was so bad that they just pushed the marigolds up out of the ground."

About the mechanics of gopher-getting, Felts says the most important key to success is that no human scents cling to the traps.

Gophers have a fantastic sense of smell, she says, and will avoid anything suspicious: "So you can't be wearing any cologne or perfume, or they'll smell it. Some people advise wearing leather gloves, but the leather has an oil that they can smell, and they won't go near the traps."

There are certain perils in gopher-getting, Felts explains. She detects the presence of gophers by getting down on the ground and sniffing their runs (male gophers have rancid-smelling urine, she says, while that of females has a sweeter aroma; the urine of pregnant females is sweetest of all) and in doing so is subject to possibly picking up any number of diseases which the flea-ridden animals carry: typhoid, rabies and bubonic plague. "Some of the people who call themselves experts say gophers don't have fleas," Felts acknowledges, "but when I catch a gopher and put the body in a Ziplock plastic bag, it isn't long before fleas are hopping all over the inside of that bag, trying to get out." And for any animal-rights activists out there who picture gophers as harmless and cuddly, Felts points out that oftentimes when she pulls her traps to the surface she finds only a head. "The other gophers in the run eat the dead one. Backbone and all. I've been bitten by them, too."

In the not-too-distant future, Felts plans to move to California. "This (Phoenix) is a great place if you want to buy cheap land or houses," she sighs, "but the economy is terrible. So I'm turning this part of the business over to my brother-in-law and moving. I might go to San Diego. They have a 176,000-acre military base over there loaded with gophers. People tell me there are enough of them that I could retire, but I doubt it. I'll have them cleaned up in a year or so. I guarantee it."

For those with questions, Felts has a wealth of knowledge and is willing to share. Write to Gopher Getters, 1017 E. Weldon, Phoenix, AZ 85014, or call (602) 278-9525.



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