Mice

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I hate mice! When I was in high school, I was cleaning out the grain bin and a mouse ran up my pants leg, after that, I hate mice.

Mice, just like humans, appreciate a cozy spot indoors in the winter. Autumn temperatures send them scurrying to shelter in warm corners behind water heaters and in cubbyholes under the sink. They don't know they are not welcome, and they make themselves at home.

Mice are enterprising, athletic, and persistent creatures, with astonishing reproductive rates. They live in garages, attics, closets, utility rooms, and porches; they build nests between the walls and in crawlspace and basements. They are also a serious nuisance: mice contaminate food, chew through electrical wires, and even transmit diseases.

"Rodents really rule the world, and mice are everywhere," says Stephen M. Vantassel, a wildlife control expert at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "But there is no reason for someone to have to tolerate a mouse problem." To mouse-proof your house, Vantassel says, "change the habitat to make it less mouse-friendly."

Annually mouse-proofing your home should go into effect late every summer or early fall. If you feed the birds, birdseed should be stored in plastic or metal containers. Place rag bags, burlap, row covers and other landscape fabric into sturdy containers, too, to reduce access to nesting materials. Restacking a woodpile or removing garden brush heaps will also discourage mice.

Indoors, a clean house is the best defense, but it's hard to be clean enough to starve a mouse, which can live for several days on a single flake of cereal. Pet food dishes are banquets for mice. Dry pet food should be stored in sealed containers.

Mice can squeeze through cracks just one-fourth of an inch wide; a dime-sized hole looks to them like an open door. To keep them out of the house, you have to seal all such gaps, working from the foundation to the roof.

"People underestimate the physical prowess of mice," Vantassel says. "They can leap vertically nine and a half inches, and they are outstanding climbers.

To get rid of an established mouse population, you have little choice but to kill the mice. Cats are "very ineffective" helpers. Place snap traps along walls, where rodents are likely to run. Use snap traps, baited with peanut butter (smooth peanut butter is fine indoors; crunchy holds up better outdoors, or caramel. Cheese is a little lower down the list) of favored baits. Mice gravitate toward warm spots, to water heaters, gas stoves, and hot-water pipes. Place traps along walls near these appliances, with the bait side toward the wall. In an attached garage, set traps along the relatively warm wall next to the house.

Once the mice are gone, keep them out by checking for openings and keeping food sources secure. Using a repellent made with peppermint and spearmint oils keeps mice away. "Mice just really hate it," Vantassel says of the minty aroma.

Toxic baits should be a last resort, used only with caution and out of reach of children, pets, and other wildlife. Always start with snap traps first, and be aggressive: use a dozen traps or more. "A mouse is an incredible critter," Vantassel says, but they don't belong in the house.

This is the time of year mice come into the home. Keeping them out of the house requires a sharp eye and effective defensive measures.

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