

Autumn is the season of the beaver

November 5 2016, John Zvirovski , Jamestown, USA



Damage can be seen to a pussy willow bush caused by a beaver harvesting its limbs.

Every fall seems to exhibit a new activity to pay attention to. It is the season when the birds begin to migrate, and the deer start to scatter due to the season.

There are also those animals that need to store their food stockpiles so they can survive through the winter months. Some of these animals hibernate while others just plan ahead. Some will feed all winter long within the garden on one resource or another. One of the most devastating can be that of the beaver.

Beavers are the second-largest rodents in the world. They do not move quickly on ground, but they can move rapidly through the water with their webbed feet and their large flat tail. They are considered herbivores and eat on many different plant

materials, but during winter these vegetative resources are less available, and they tend to veer toward hardwood food sources.

They have been making their presence known once again this autumn season by beginning to harvest young sapling trees in yards, tree stands and along the rivers. They definitely leave tell-tale signs of destruction in their path resembling chewed-off swords protruding from the ground. These are just the pointed remnants that remain from the trees that have been removed.

The large front teeth of the beaver continuously grow, so the beaver has to gnaw on wood to file them down and keep them in check. They also act as very valuable tools to cut down small and large trees to use for food during the cold months of winter. These teeth are very sharp and can literally take chunks out of a tree's bark and core wood until the tree topples. Once the trees fall, they will drag them off to the nearest water source to float them to their lodge where they will store them for later use. Sometimes they will topple a tree that is too large to haul off; in these cases they just view it as a lesson learned from a little too much ambition.

Some years have greater damage than others depending on the season. I always feel animals in nature know what is going to happen in the months to come, as they have an incredible instinct in which I think we should be aware. Over the last few years their activity along the river had been minimal, and the resulting winters were quite mild. Hmmm, I'm thinking they sensed this and knew they would not have a food shortage, but that is just my guess. Three years ago we had a pretty harsh winter and their voracious appetite for food was apparent the fall prior to its arrival. There were numerous trees down both young and old. So far this year, the damage has been fairly mild, but the forecast is for colder-than-normal winters come January. My guess is that the weathermen are off a little on this hypothesis, and it won't be as bad as they state based on the beavers' activity. I have yet to check the thickness of the woolly caterpillar's coat or the density and size of the pig's spleen, but there will be reports on them both soon I am sure.

This past week, as I was outside in the early hours of morning with the dog, I noticed my large pussy willow bush in its full glory. About three weeks ago, I noticed one of

the main limbs on the base missing from a beaver, so I encircled the bush with chicken wire to prevent further damage. All was good until this past week when I noticed one morning that the chicken wire barrier had been pushed down and three quarters of the bush had been removed, leaving only a few limbs left along with a great deal of wood chips. For me it was a major setback as I will not have pussy willows to harvest once spring arrives, but I also know the root system is still there and it will come back with a vengeance to produce great branches for the year that follows. Many of the young trees that are chopped off at the base will also re-grow and form new trees, many of which will be strong all the way into maturity. The older ones do not recover quite as well, if at all.

Typically beavers go after a preferred wood source such as aspen, cottonwood, willow, alder, birch, maple and cherry trees. Typically these are smooth-barked trees that have soft skins and wood when young. Even though these are their foods of choice, I have also seen them remove ash, elm, box elder and spruce trees too, but only in the harshest of seasons.

If you have trees or shrubs that are susceptible to beavers or other rodent damage, try using some protective measures to prevent their sharp teeth from making contact with the tender tissue. For trees, usually a chicken wire barrier works well, just make sure it is anchored to an upper limb to prevent the beaver from climbing on it and pulling the mesh downward. Some beavers can be as large as 65 pounds, so this can be an easy task on free-standing barriers.

A PVC wrap can be useful also, just make sure it is tall enough so they cannot reach above it. I once had a cherry tree get chopped off at 3 feet high, right above the barrier. Large beavers can balance on their large, flat tails and hind legs in order to get to the resources they seek out. It never hurts to be one step ahead of these guys.

Soon their season of hunting and gathering will be over and they will retreat to their storehouse of food for the cold months that lie ahead, but until that time comes you might want to keep an eye out and protect those plants you want to keep. Enjoy nature to its fullest, but be aware of the natural maladies that might come along with the critters in the garden.