



FARMERS MARKET: Those squirrely rodents

By Leeann Barton, 3 January 2016, Stillwater News Press

A part of every garden is the wildlife. Like plants the variety and quantity of birds, bees and critters differs with the seasons. I see all living things as a part of God's infinite orchestration, each with a specific function and purpose. Certainly each brings a unique personality to my garden that leads to many entertaining moments; still at times I get stuck trying to figure out what a creature's real purpose is. For months I have been so considering the squirrel.

Trying to research a squirrel's function in nature is like finding a needle in a haystack. One field guide to North American wildlife gave about half a sentence stating that squirrels, by churning up the soil, help alleviate water run-off. This one positive attribute is lost in a mountain of negative information. To an agricultural society, loosening the soil is overshadowed by the bigger problem of squirrels feeding on planted seed.

I envision in a society that gathers rather than grows food, squirrels would be an indicator of nearby food, for opportunist squirrels go for the easy pickings first. One website commented that "like man, squirrels sit on their butts while they eat." When I think about it, few other animals do! When food is abundant, squirrel populations may be high, but they are rarely troublesome.

In times of "famine," squirrels (true rodents), will resort to gnawing on roots or removing the bark of trees looking for food. City parks that complain have eliminated "messy" trees that drop squirrel friendly food in spring, summer and fall. Maples' winged samaras, acorns, even the native pecans combined, keep squirrels from destroying saplings. Planting a variety of seed producing trees ensures if one "crop" fails, another will provide sustenance.

Those who want to feed squirrels should stick to peanuts, sunflower seeds and corn. Fruit and garbage are no-nos. Also, feed the cute little animals away from the house to discourage their attempting to remove screens or set up house in your attic.

Scientists have for some time been studying squirrels to discover what allows them, while hibernating, to decrease their heartbeat from 300 to about 10 beats per minute. Squirrels also decrease their body temperatures to zero and can quickly and healthily come out of hibernation. They have narrowed it down to a pancreatic enzyme that feeds off fat instead of sugar. It may sound squirrely, but I might be interested in sleeping a few months and awaking to find a refreshed and thin me! Let me munch some pecans and think about it.