



Make Way for Chipmunks!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Local chipmunk populations seem to be booming this year. These cute little rodents are running rampant throughout my yard, stuffing their cheeks with birdseed and then burying clusters of seeds in my garden beds. Up pops a dozen or so sunflower or millet plants where you would least expect them.

The eastern chipmunk (*Tamias striatus*) is a very distinctive member of the squirrel family. Its 5 to 6-inch body is covered with short, dense, rusty red fur. The tail is another 3 to 4-inches long and held upright as the critter scurries along. Five black and 2 white stripes run down its back and sides. The cheek pouches of the eastern chipmunk can hold a large amount of food and stretch to 3 times the size of its head.

While natural habitats from Maine to northern Florida include forests and woodlands, chipmunks are quite content to inhabit urban and suburban parks and yards. They especially appreciate the birdseed we humans leave out in hopes of attracting feathered friends.

Chipmunks are omnivores with nuts, berries, seeds and fruits making up the majority of their diets. They will also consume insects, slugs and worms, occasionally feeding on bird's eggs, frogs and even baby birds. Most likely their abundance this year is due to the heavy acorn crop in many places last year as well as a mild winter.

The burrow that a chipmunk digs is quite amazing. The 2-inch entrance hole leads to a tunnel 2 to 3 feet down and 10 to 30 feet long. Off the main tunnel are chambers used for storing food, giving birth, sleeping and defecating. Once the burrow is excavated, the chipmunk plugs up the original entrance hole with its tell-tale mound of dirt and makes a less conspicuous entrance perhaps under a fallen tree or rock.

In Connecticut, chipmunks typically have two litters per year, one in early spring and the other in mid-summer. After mating, males and females go their separate ways and the male does not participate in rearing the young. After a gestation period of about 30 days, 2 to 5 hairless, blind young are born.

The female is an attentive mother for the first 6 weeks or so as the young begin to venture outside the burrow. She then starts becoming more aggressive with them forcing them to start

foraging on their own. At about 10 weeks, the young are no longer allowed into her burrow and must find new homes. As a rule, chipmunks are solitary creatures coming together only for mating purposes.

They can be quite vocal with shrill, repeated chirps. It is thought that these might be to signal mating interest or territorial in nature. They also are made when a threat is sensed. Chipmunks have a fair number of predators including hawks, owls, foxes, weasels, coyotes and snakes.

During the winter, chipmunks spend long periods sleeping but do not go into a true hibernation. They are able to slow down their heart rate and lower their body temperature, but they wake up every so often to feed on stored seeds and nuts and to defecate.

While they are cute and fun to watch, too many chipmunks can be a nuisance. In the garden, they are digging holes and most annoyingly, digging up newly planted transplants leaving them with their exposed roots to die in the hot sun. They often dig up recently planted bulbs as well. Some they eat but the unappealing ones they just leave on top of the ground. Apparently, we gardeners are invading their territory, and this is how they let us know that they do not approve.

Another issue with chipmunks is that they can undermine patios, porch steps, rock walls and other structures because of their digging habits. They can be excluded from some areas by using quarter inch mesh hardware cloth. Other control mechanisms include trapping, repellents and landscape modifications.

For questions about chipmunks or for questions on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

