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## Controlling Mice in the Winter

For such little creatures, mice are famous for giving us a big fright when they scurry across the floor. Mice in the home aren't only unsanitary and potentially destructive, they're also a deeply unsettling reminder that our homes aren't as sealed off from the outside world as we like to think they are.

Most information available about mouse control focuses on their summer behavior. This is important, but because almost half of our year is winter and mice don't hibernate, it's worth asking what they are up to for all that time.

When it comes to surviving the winter, think of mice as tender perennials. They have a better chance of overwintering if ample snow falls before the mercury plummets (which is why we had so many in 2011) and if they have some mulch to snuggle into.

Mice burrow to look for old leaves, twigs, mulch or detritus to nest into and they prefer deep, undisturbed snow for easy digging. Having established a nest they next wreck havoc on your lawn and nearby plants by devouring any vegetation they can get their nasty little teeth around.

This winter, don't abandon your back yard to be a waste-land of undisturbed snow. Untouched, virgin snow fields may look serene but, like calm water over a coral reef, they bustle with activity just below the surface.

Watch for tracks scampering across the snow that sometimes vanish as they tunnel downwards (look for a line the tail makes). If you had mice in the summer (and most yards do) than don't be fooled; they are down there.

### **Protect your Home**

Mice will try to make themselves a house-guest throughout the winter. Their mousy senses tell them that the house is full of warm carpets to curl up in and delicious couches to chew to pieces.

To protect your home do a thorough clean-up around its perimeter in the fall. Make sure that mulch, detritus, and miscellaneous junk is scraped well away from the foundation. This will discourage varmints from making nests next to the home.

Calories are precious in winter, so mice will tunnel through the snow in the easiest direction. Get into your yard and stomp the snow down in a big circle around the house. Deny the mice easy tunneling and they will be less likely to scout for opportunities in your foundation.

When you're shoveling, try to heave extra snow onto your perennial and flower beds. On top of crushing mice tunnels and nests, it will provide extra moisture for your plants in the spring.

Don't put poison out in the winter (I don't recommend putting it out at all). Unless they get into the house mice don't breed in the winter. All you need to do is discourage them from turning your winter lawn into a frozen buffet.

That being said, if they do get into your home: declare war. They can have 6-10 litters a year and, especially if you don't have a cat, they can very hard to get rid of once they get established.

### **Hantavirus**

I want to take a moment to clear up some misconceptions about this dangerous disease. While it is potentially fatal and needs to be taken seriously, we tend to be more frightened than we need to be as the vast majority of mice we encounter don't carry it.

If you see a brown mouse with little eyes and ears, you don't have to worry. This is a house mouse and they aren't carriers. Coming into contact with their droppings, while admittedly disgusting, won't give us Hantavirus.

The carriers are deer mice which occur in rural areas and, thankfully, aren't known to venture into houses. Their eyes and ears are longer than a house mouse's and their tail is longer. They also have white tummies. They are so distinctly different from house mice that you'd know one if you saw one.

