Make your garden beds unattractive to pests

Gardeners put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into making their landscapes look as good as they can. Gardeners often relish in the thought that neighbors driving by enjoy the pleasing aesthetics of their hard work.

However, it can be disheartening to work tirelessly in the garden, only to find the pest population also has found it attractive. Fortunately, there are various steps that can be taken to encourage pests to find another place to visit.

Properly selecting and rotating crops, sanitizing and solarizing the soil, choosing the best planting and harvest times and using resistant varieties and certified plants are just a few cultural control methods gardeners can use to cut down on the pest population.

Certain pests are more common in some crops than in others. Rotating crops to different sites can isolate pests from their food source or can change the conditions pests must tolerate. If another site isn’t available, try changing the type of crop grown in that area. If possible, avoid putting members of the same plant family in the same location in consecutive seasons. For example, don’t plant cucumbers or squash after a melon harvest.

Waiting two years to plant the same family of vegetable in the same location is the most effective rotation practice; however, yearly rotations also can be beneficial. Rotating annual flower plantings is a good practice, too.

Some organisms that cause damage and insect problems overwinter in plant debris such as shriveled fruit. Diseases on plant debris may infect new leaves in the spring. It’s important to remove crop residues, weeds, thatch and volunteer plants by either disposing of them in a compost pile or by spading them into the soil to deter pest buildup and eliminate food and shelter for these pests.

Soil solarization is a fairly easy method of cultural control. Simply spread a sheet of clear plastic over the soil. The plastic traps solar heat, which kills soilborne diseases, insects, nematodes and many weed seeds. During the heat of the summer is the best time to employ this method. Be sure to keep the soil moist during the solarization process, which takes several weeks. Check out Oklahoma State University Extension’s fact sheet on soil solarization.

Early planting and harvesting also may help avoid heavy pest infestations, but still allow for achieving a full yield. If planting early, gardeners may have to make use of cold frames or hot
caps to protect seedlings from the weather while they get a head start on growing. Stronger, older plants have a better competitive edge over pests. Gardeners also need to be familiar with the emergence times and life cycles of the pests needing to be controlled.

One of the easiest things to do is simply buy seeds or plants with built-in resistance to diseases and nematodes. Check for plants labeled certified or grown and inspected under sterile or quarantined conditions. These plants may cost a little more, but they’re worth it.