



Waldo County 4-H Program  
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*Putting knowledge to work with the people of Maine*

## What is Eating My Garden?

**Purpose of activity:** The purpose of this activity is to teach youth how to be nature detectives and look for clues to identify what is eating their garden plants. As a nature detective, youth will find clues and learn how to make a plaster cast of an animal track or identify insects.

The first step in eradicating your garden pests is to identify what is eating your garden. Garden plants are a great snack for rodents, insects, and larger animals. If you do not know what kind of animal is munching on your garden, start by completing part one of the activity to see if you get any animal tracks around your garden. If you do not get any animal tracks around your garden, but are still seeing signs of something eating your plants, move to part two to see if you can identify any insects that are eating your plants.

### Animal Tracks- Part One

#### Materials:

- [Guide to Animal Tracks](#)
- Piece of heavy cardstock
- Two paper clips
- Glass-measuring cup
- Plaster of Paris (4 teaspoons)
- Measuring spoons
- Mixing spoon
- Bucket of water

#### Make the Track Bed:

1. In the evening, wet down dirt around garden so that it will be moist during the night. For raised beds, you may need to add dirt around the beds before wetting it. If you do not have dirt, sand will work as well.
2. In the morning, check the area around your garden or raised beds for animal tracks. If you do not see any tracks, you may need to repeat this process a few times in case the animal is not coming to your garden every night.
3. If you find an animal track in the dirt around your garden, continue the activity to make a cast of the track and identify the animal. If you are still seeing damage to your garden, but have not seen any animal tracks, continue to part two of this activity to see if you can identify any insects that are eating your garden.



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### **Make the Cast:**

For an instructional video on how to make the cast visit [youtube.com/watch?v=Cmz0gkWdr6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cmz0gkWdr6s)

4. Once you have found a track in the dirt around your garden, use cardstock to make a fence slightly bigger than the animal track and place the form over your track. Use a paper clip to hold the form together.
5. Next, you will need to mix plaster of paris. Add four to six teaspoons of plaster of paris to the glass-measuring cup.
6. Add a enough water to the plaster of paris to make a mixture that is a thick consistency. You will have to gauge how much plaster and water to use based on the size of the track. You may have to add a bit more plaster.
7. Pour plaster into the form. You should have enough plaster to fill the track completely, but you do not need to fill the entire cardstock fence.
8. Let the plaster set. If desired, you can carve the date or your name into the cast while it is drying.
9. Drying time will vary. Refer to the plaster instructions for more information on drying times.
10. When the plaster is set, take your spoon and dig up the dirt around the cast to free the cast from the dirt.
11. Brush the dirt off the cast or wash it gently with water if necessary.
12. After the cast is washed, you should be able to see the track clearly. Use your animal track guide to identify the animal that left the track.

### **Insects – Part Two**

#### **Materials:**

- [Insect identification guide](#)
- Container of natural solution (vinegar, water, dish detergent) to place bugs in

#### **Identify the Insects:**

1. If you are noticing damage to your garden, but were not able to discover any animals leaving tracks at your garden, insects may be the culprit for your garden damage.
2. Look closely at your plants and see if there are any insects on the plants. If you see any insects, remove them and place them in the container of solution.
3. After you have your insect in the container, refer to your insect identification resource to identify the insect. If you do not have an insect identification guide, visit [insectidentification.org](http://insectidentification.org) for an online resource. For help in identifying the insect or find a solution to a plant problem, contact your local UMaine Cooperative Extension office.