

Battle Bears Fruit

By Chris Nguyen

When gophers began destroying his orange trees two years ago, John Adams fought back. Adams who owns the last orange grove in Rialto, has always struggled to rid the orchard of gophers, burrowing rodents the size of rats that feed on the roots of his orange trees. That's part of the headache of running an orchard, he said. But two years ago, at a time when Adams had plans to restore the grove of 1,000 trees, the furry critters became a migraine, destroying as many as 75 trees, making many more sickly and damaging irrigation canals.

In February of last year, the 56-year-old Rialto native began hunting the rodents with steel traps and zinc phosphide, a poison that looks like bleached cat food and smells like rotten garlic. Adams spent hours every day hunting gophers, setting traps, and filling the tunnels they dig with poison. Each day he walked four miles, inspecting each row of trees. "They killed the trees and made the grove less productive," Adams said recently, as he walked through the orchard on Cactus Avenue. "I didn't realize how bad of an effect they were having on the grove. They got so bad it almost became impossible to irrigate. The grove was slowly going downhill. There were so many gophers. Something had to be done. When I started out, they were everywhere." Although he doesn't have proof, Adams attributed the significant increase of gophers to a nearby warehouse, which was built about two years ago.

A year and a half later, Adams said he killed practically all of the gophers that turned his 10 acre orchard into a feeding ground. Today, he said his latest orange crop, which is harvested in November or December each year, will be his finest in the past 25 years.

The biggest headache for Adams was one rodent that he dubbed "super gopher." It was the same rodent he spent months hunting, the same vermin that eluded every trap Adams rigged. "It worked harder than any other gopher in the grove," Adams said. "It dug many more tunnels than any other gopher. Here was a gopher who was a star." Adams used steel traps, poison, and even smoke bombs but couldn't catch the star gopher, whose escape tactics he grew to admire. However, after months of failure, he spotted the gopher running above ground, scooped it up with a shovel and released it in Riverside, in a field with other gophers. For the most part, Adams said, he rarely handled a live or dead gopher. He said they likely died in the tunnels they dug under the grove. "They were killing the trees" Adams said. "Now they are fertilizing them."

It's been about two weeks since Adams last saw evidence of gophers. Now that the pests are gone, he said, the trees will begin producing more and better quality oranges. Adams has spent the last 10 years trying to restore the grove. In addition to getting rid of the gophers, he eliminated Bermuda grass, which he discovered robs water and nutrients from the orange trees and attracts gophers.

To some, Adams has become something of an expert gopher exterminator. He has helped several Rialto residents, including his neighbor, Vincent Cheng. Several months ago, Cheng's property was plagued with about 50 gophers. They nearly destroyed his apricot and magnolia trees. Cheng, 66, tried every route he knew to kill the gophers, including smoke bombs and electronic beepers designed to annoy the rodents and drive them away. But nothing worked, until Adams fed Cheng's gophers the same poison he used. In several months they disappeared. "I almost gave up" Cheng said, shaking his head and pointing to his back yard. "But right now, you can call this gopher free." The neighbors recently recounted their gopher stories, sitting in Cheng's back yard, which is scarred by tunnels now camouflaged by grass. In the background, they see Adams' orange grove, seeing mostly the tops of the trees. "It was a long battle." Adams said. "I thought it would take a few weeks to get rid of them. Hopefully, the trees will be more productive now."