

Groundhog grazes on good side, until ... |

Being a city girl born in Queens, New York, and raised on Long Island, I never paid much attention to Groundhog Day except that I knew people got all excited in February to see a furry little creature pop out of its hole. I knew it had something to do with the last few weeks of winter, but, frankly, I could never quite understand the hullabaloo involved in this American tradition.



**As I
see it**

Peg DeMarco

Recently, however, as a happy native of the foothills of North Carolina, I have a new respect for the groundhog. About a month ago, I thought I saw the back of a fuzzy brown cat at the edge of our property. I thought I had seen it run by before, but it was so quick, that I couldn't tell exactly what it was. Once it sensed my gaze, it stood up, turned to the left to reveal its profile, and then scurried down into the thick brush. It was then that I realized what I had thought was a cat was actually a groundhog that had decided the bread and seeds thrown to the birds proved to be a mighty good meal.

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I decided to research our new furry friend and discovered an array of Web sites devoted exclusively to the groundhog. Did you know that there is actually a group of people known as "The Inner Circle" that follows the exploits of the groundhog and its yearly prediction of remaining winter weeks? The Inner Circle has a President, Fog Spinner, Cloud Builder, Storm Chaser and even a Scribe. There's a Stump Warden, Sage, Burrow Master and someone dubbed "His Protector." If you have access to a computer, you can go on www.groundhog.org and join the Groundhog National Club and find out all the steps it takes to start a local chapter. There's even a chapter application, membership fee and newsletter.

These days, our groundhog visits us at least three times a day. I've purchased shelled

peanuts and a special mix of small animal food for him and during hot and humid days, I even put a bowl of water out with a clump of ice cubes so the poor thing doesn't dehydrate. Yes, I realize that many of you lifelong foothill residents will think that this crazy Yankee is going to the extreme and my only line of defense is that even in my darkest of moods at the end of a stressful day, this little critter never fails to bring a smile to my face.

A smile, however, until recently. Surveying my flower garden a couple of days ago, my heart sank when I saw that some of my shrubs and flowers had been eaten to the root. We have a hefty number of rabbits, but I remember specifically spotting the groundhog in the flower patch so I figured it had to be the culprit even with all the goodies I had been throwing to it.

My husband and I are novices at mountain living — we stumble around in this area we laughingly call "the wild." For instance, as lifelong blacktop residents, we're trying to grow a lawn for the first time in our lives and have been battling non-stop with some ugly little insects called grubs. You'll also see us out often spraying our roses for beetles and painstakingly trying to keep the perimeter of our property from growing wild with thorny blackberry bushes. So, it was with some apprehension that we ventured out recently to our local Wal-Mart to see about some fencing to keep our friendly groundhog out of our prized garden.

Strolling through the aisles and frowning at the unsightly chicken wire, I picked up an aerosol can of repellent that promised to deter small animals and asked my husband what he thought about using it instead. We were overheard discussing the spray's merits and our plight by two men who quickly joined in our conversation.

"That ain't gonna help, Ma'am. Rabbits bothering you?" one man asked, and I shook my head no.

"Groundhog. We can't keep him out of our garden."

"Yup, I know what you mean. I've got a slew of them, too," he said, shaking his

head and folding his arms across his chest. "Crock pot works pretty darn good."

"Crock pot?" I asked, wondering if he was suggesting that I throw my crock pot at the groundhog.

"Yup. The meat is pretty tender if you cook the hog all day and throw a couple of onions in for flavor."

My husband was smiling by now as he watched me shift uncomfortably in place and put my hands up in front of me in protest. "No," I said slowly. "You don't understand. I don't want to kill the groundhog and eat him. I just want to keep him out of my garden."

The other man grinned. "Excuse me, ma'am, but you won't have too much luck keeping him out of your garden unless you put up a mighty strong fence. And even at that, they're darn smart. I bet he'll find a way in."

We left Wal-Mart that afternoon with green posts and chicken wire and a couple of cans of repellent. Working in the hot sun all day, we finally managed to get our fence put up, and I threw a double handful of peanuts out that night for our furry friend. My reasoning is that as long as I keep feeding him, he'll leave the half-chewed bushes and flowerbeds alone.

So far, so good on the groundhog front. He's getting fat and the flowerbeds look good. I recently received an e-mail from a friend who lives in Salem, Va., about her father's plight with his groundhog. Her father, born and bred in the South, is, according to her, at "an out and out war" with a groundhog and all the deer eating his tomato plants. Being a pacifist/psychologist, she went on to say that he won't shoot it, but is trying herbal remedies like red pepper flakes and hot sauce without much luck. It seems his groundhog has taken a liking to hot sauce.

All I know is that I now know who Punxsutawney Phil is and when Feb. 2, 2005 rolls around next year, you can be sure I'll be out there waiting patiently to see if my own little weatherman has any predictions on when spring will arrive.

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