

Scarecrows: Their Origins and Use in Agriculture

by Sara Daleski, Fairfax Master Gardener

Fall is my favorite time of year! I love walking around my neighborhood when the weather turns cool to see all of the fall decorations. Every year one of my neighbors fashions a different Scarecrow. She is so creative. Each year the Scarecrow's clothes and hats change; sometimes they are silly, sometimes scary. They stay on her front bench through Thanksgiving before being replaced by the next round of holiday décor, and the entire neighborhood enjoys them. What is the origin of these mannequins? How were they historically used, and what are their current agricultural uses? And how can we use Scarecrows in our gardens?



History

Scarecrows have been used in various forms for thousands of years. Scarecrows have many purposes. They create the illusion that humans are present, and so they serve as guardians for farms and crops. They symbolize the harvest season and the end of summer. They are also the artistic expression of those who create them.

While little academic research exists on the history of Scarecrows, sources say that Scarecrows were first used in Egypt to scare quail into nets to be eaten, then in Greece to both trap birds and keep them away from crops. Their use then spread throughout Europe and Asia. The primary function of early Scarecrows was to keep wildlife away from crops and seedlings. Scarecrows in the shape of humans could take the job of a man or child guarding the field, freeing people to work elsewhere. Scarecrows came to the Americas with immigrant farmers from Europe and Asia. However, Native Americans were already using Scarecrows; men or children hid in huts to scare birds and wildlife away from crops. Scarecrows are now part of American culture - featured in cinema from horror to the charm of the Wizard of Oz, and seen often as fall decorations, frequently creatively executed.



19th Century scarecrow reconstruction

photo: Notafly, Creative Commons

Agricultural Uses

Several articles argued that following World War II, farmers began to use pesticides to combat insects, birds and rodents, rather than Scarecrows, often with disastrous impacts on the environment and public health. Organophosphates, carbamates, neonicotinoids and rodenticides are particularly dangerous to birds, either through direct exposure or secondary poisoning. Today farmers are using technology rather than Scarecrows to safely deter birds and animals. Farmers use motorized lasers that are optimized to the color and motion sensitivity of bird's eyes to deter birds. These lasers cover large fields quickly without damaging crops.



Want to make a Scarecrow for your garden? Other things used to scare crows are fake owls, recorded sounds of crows in distress, motion-activated lights, and mylar ribbon. Just remember, crows are very smart and your tactics may need to change frequently. But, you have many options to make your own!

Scarecrows can be made from worn out clothing, hats and other items. Last year my neighbor created hers using a plastic skeleton. Mount your Scarecrow on a sturdy garden stake or post. You can use a burlap bag, plastic Halloween pumpkin or balloon for the head. Stuff the body (using old clothes) with straw, hay or grass clippings, tying the ends to secure. Aside from dummy-type Scarecrows, home gardeners can also use plastic snakes and owls, metal twirlers or whirligigs or mirrored flashers that move in the wind. Think of things that are shiny, that move intermittently or unpredictably, and that could deter

wildlife without injuring them. I had great success with long silver ribbon around my strawberry patch this year; solar lights kept them sparkling at night. Normally deer feed on them while we sleep_- not this year!

Scarecrows are more than holiday decorations, movie props and garden devices. They are part of our culture and history and agricultural heritage. The town of Pearisburg, Virginia has a Scarecrow festival each year, where you can learn more about the history and craftsmanship of scarecrow making.

Research has shown that birds are alarmed by the lasers and quickly become frightened and move away. Birds also do not become accustomed to the lasers.

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- [Scarecrow Festival](#), Pearisburg, VA
- [The Story of Scarecrows](#), C. T. Ward, Frederick County Master Gardeners