

THE STORY OF SCARECROWS

By C. T. Ward, Frederick County Master Gardener, November, 2023

Acting as a modern-day symbol of autumn and harvest, scarecrows are renowned for looking like comical clowns in summer's fields or like ghastly, ghoulish fiends during Halloween. Economical and ecological, they help provide balance on a planet where humans struggle to co-exist with their wildlife neighbors.

However, as often as we see scarecrows as part of our popular culture in agriculture, decorations, and media, the biggest question about scarecrows still baffles people: Do scarecrows actually work?

Juliet Favero notes in her October 2022 article, "The History of Scarecrows," for thanksgivingpoint.org, that ancient Egyptians would hide and then scare birds into nets held up by wooden frames in an effort to save crops planted along the Nile River. Likewise, many indigenous groups in the Americas opted for a similar tactic, sitting on platforms and shouting at birds and other wildlife to scare them away from crops.

Both Favero in her article and Lori Rotenberk in "Hay, Man: The Curious Life and Times of Scarecrows," for *Modern Farmer*, explain that the ancient Greek and Roman farmers placed statues of the god Priapus, the god of horticulture and fertility, in their fields to bless the harvest. Priapus' origins also had Eastern European and Asian roots, even back to Norse and to Japanese mythology. A rough-looking fellow, Priapus' physical attributes paid homage to the animalistic and vegetative primal mating instincts of wildlife and untamed flora. His influence spread as the Romans conquered most of Europe and met with his Asian counterpart in trade routes and nomadic farming and merchant communities.

Today's scarecrows can be linked back to medieval times in Britain and Western Europe. There, scarecrows replaced children in the fields to scare off wildlife damaging crops, as the children were needed more for farm and other work. It is believed that during the Black Plague when so many of the population died, farmers and landowners would stuff sacks with straw and other disposable material to make "fake" humans, creating "heads" with old gourds and tying the structure to poles to imitate a person standing upright.

What we perceive as the "spooky" side of a scarecrow's origins can be traced again to Dark Ages European folklore, with the concepts of the *bogeyman* and Ireland's Jack-O-Lantern. These monsters were typically depicted as having human-like forms dressed in tattered clothing to trick people into interacting with them, according to "The History of Scarecrows," agecrofthall.org. Farmers placed candles inside the pumpkin and gourd "heads" to help protect the guiding flames from the wind. People normally used these versions of scarecrows to help ward off evil and creatures who aimed to do harm to their fields, livestock, and families. This particular style carried over to and was most popular with the American colonists and stuck over time.

Nowadays, scarecrows are normally seen as an aesthetic addition to gardens and veggie patches, rather than as a necessity to appease deities and shoo birds and pests from crops. Birds and other wildlife,

especially now with overurbanization and rapid development, get used to humans and objects over time. If the scarecrow isn't moved every couple of days to a new position, animals learn that it isn't a threat and continue business as usual.

So, no, although scarecrows may work, they aren't a one-and-done solution to protecting your gardens.

Over time, scientists and horticulturists have developed more effective ways to ward off pesky birds and rodents from our growing food, but it doesn't always mean they are the best methods. Overuse of pesticides, alarms, and other unnatural phenomena have been detrimental to our critter neighbors to the extent that they scare away pollinators, tiny and large, that help us maintain balance and produce nutritious and wholesome crops.

Still, maybe we need to take another look at our good friend the scarecrow and relearn from our ancestors on how to use scarecrows to help us balance our interaction and impact on the Earth. It clearly isn't the end-all solution to our pest-control woes, but it definitely is a creative one with a colorful history behind it.



A **modern-day scarecrow** decorates the garden. Note the twigs used to create hands and fingers. *(photo courtesy of the author)*

A **1920s scarecrow**, dressed in a long robe and sporting a detailed, intricate face. Presumably, when the wind blew, the flapping of the long, wide sleeves and gown helped to scare away birds and other garden scavengers. *(photo courtesy of Abu Knof)*





Today's scarecrows are likely to be used simply as symbols of fall. Here a small scarecrow decorates potted plants indoors. (*photo courtesy of Maritta Perry Grau*)



Scarecrows today come in all shapes and sizes and are probably used more for fall decorations, indoors, as well as out of doors, rather than to actually try to scare away predators, right up through Thanksgiving. (*photo courtesy of Maritta Perry Grau*)

Whether or not you want to put a scarecrow in your garden, check our website or Facebook for upcoming free seminars, Master Gardener certification classes, as well as other announcements. For more information about the Frederick County Extension Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, gardening information and advice visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland> . UME Home & Garden Information Center, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center> .

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