

Deer Resistant Garden

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Sharing the beauty of nature

Wildlife are an integral part of our ecosystem. We enjoy their presence but at times may pay a price such as deer-browsing damage on our favorite plants. So, how do we graciously share our landscape with them?

Other wildlife species (like rabbits, raccoons, opossums, mountain beavers, squirrels, geese and ducks) may also eat landscape plants. But deer browsing can pose the most serious nuisance for gardeners, depending on how close our homes are to the woodlands.

The most common deer we see in our backyards are black-tailed mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*). They are even-toed, split-hooved mammals. A very adaptable herbivore, they occupy a wide range of western North America and favor forest-edge habitat. They have black-tipped tails. The males (bucks) grow antlers from April to August, which are covered by soft velvet. When the velvet layer dries, the males rub it off on the nearest available structures (trees, shrubs, rocks, buildings) before the fall rut. In mid-winter, they shed the antlers and regrow them the next spring.

The deer have a home range of about 600 acres, roughly one square mile. Their daily travel routine may be 5 miles, and the home range can shift seasonally and gradually. They are most active in early-morning and early-evening hours, but most of the day they bed in sheltered areas such as under low overhanging trees.

The deer's diet includes leaves, stems and buds of woody plants. Forbs (herbaceous plants) are eaten in the spring and summer when available. In the winter, deer are adapted to eating mostly woody materials and will eat almost anything.

On average, a deer eats 2% to 4% of its body weight each day from plant materials. A mature 200-pound buck may eat 8 pounds of vegetation per day and cause cumulative damage over time. Deer have their favorite foods and will search for them even when other foods are abundant around them.

We can tell whether the damage is done by the deer, from the characteristically rough, jagged cuts, often appearing on the higher tips of a plant. Rodents and rabbits leave a clean cut when they browse.

Deer are classified as game animals, so hunting (permitted in certain seasons and in certain areas) has been a method of control in addition to their natural predators (coyotes, raccoons and domestic dogs). In the urban areas, such natural and man-made controls are non-existent, hence, a problem.



Five most deer-resistant plants for sun: clockwise from upper left: Mexican Orange (*Choisya*), David Viburnum (*Viburnum davidii*), Spurge (*Euphorbia*), Wall flower (*Erysimum*), and Japanese Holly (*Ilex crenata*). Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

To fend off deer, many property owners resort to fences, repellants and gadgets that create noise or motion to scare them away with mixed results. A domestic dog, if allowed to run loose, is also useful. Designing the garden with concealed access points may be equally effective because deer refrain from going into a space that they cannot clearly see.

Deer are creatures of habit, so preventing them from knowing and accessing our gardens would be a first step toward excluding them. Curtailing and changing their existing routes would be more difficult but can be done over time.

However, the most natural and easiest way would be to build a garden with highly deer-resistant planting. Deer do not really like plants with a strong scent, thick or leathery leaves, or fuzzy, bristly, or spiny textures. On the other hand, tender growth from over-fertilizing or too much shade may make a plant more palatable.

By planting deer-resistant plants, home gardeners can win some of the turf war with deer. Examples of such deer favorites are rose, laurel, fruit trees, twig dogwood, burning bush, ninebark and arborvitae.



Five most-deer-resistant plants for shade: clockwise from upper left: Sweetbox (*Sarcococca*), Lily of the Valley Shrub (*Pieris*), Leucothoe, Rhododendron, and Hellebore (*Helleborus*)

Most conifer trees (fir, incense cedar, deodar cedar, false cypress, cypress, juniper, spruce, pine, western red cedar, and hemlock) are safe from deer browsing, except Douglas fir and yew. A common damage to conifers by deer is caused by bucks rubbing their antlers against the tree trunks and stripping off the bark. This can eventually kill the trees.

Broadleaf trees that are reasonably safe from deer browsing include maple, silk tree, birch, catalpa, Oregon ash, sweetgum, madrone, oak, sumac and willow. Still, in urban areas with non-existent “carrying capacity” for deer, damage could still occur.

Other more deer-resistant plants include evergreen and deciduous shrubs, vines and groundcovers. (Deer-resistant means deer are less likely to eat a particular plant. If a deer is hungry enough, almost any plant is fair game.)

Evergreen shrubs include: boxwood, California lilac, Mexican orange, rock rose, daphne, Japanese aralia, Japanese holly, leucothoe, privet, boxleaf honeysuckle, Oregon grape, Pacific wax myrtle, lily-of-the-valley shrub, heavenly bamboo, rhododendron, sweet box, evergreen huckleberry, Burkwood viburnum and David viburnum.

Deciduous shrubs are barberry, blue beard, corokia, silverberry, forsythia, kerria, beauty bush, magnolia, potentilla, firethorn, red-flowering current, elderberry, spirea, snowberry and lilac.

Deer-resistant vines include: clematis, honeysuckle and wisteria. Groundcovers are kinnikinnik, heather, heath, bunchberry, cotoneaster, beach strawberry and salal.

Most vegetable crops can be easily damaged by deer, but the onion family and potato should be safe. Many herbs are deer-resistant, such as garden chives, hyssop, mint, rosemary, lavender, thyme, sweet marjoram, oregano and rue.

Deer-resistant perennials are yarrow, monkshood, anise hyssop, wormwood, foxglove, wallflower, spurge, hellebore, candytuft, Shasta daisy, lupine, rose campion, bee balm, daffodil, catmint, Russian sage, lungwort, New Zealand flax, sage and lavender cotton.

Some annual flowers are reasonably deer-resistant, including calendula, bachelor buttons, clarkia, larkspur, cosmos, California poppy, sweet alyssum, geranium and zinnia.

When we understand the deer as a forest-edge inhabitant, we tend to accept and enjoy their presence more. And when we understand what they like and dislike, we can build our deer-resistant garden to share the beauty of nature with them.

Resources:

- ***Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest.*** Russell Link. University of Washington Press and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 1999.
- ***Living with Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest.*** Russell Link. University of Washington Press and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2004.
- ***Pacific Northwest Wildlife Management Basics for Pesticide Applicator Licensing.*** Washington State University Extension, Publication EN008. 2009.
- ***Wildlife of the Pacific Northwest: Tracking and Identifying Mammals, Birds, Reptiles, Amphibians, and Invertebrates.*** David Moskowitz. Timberpress Field Guide, 2010.
- ***Living with Wildlife: Deer.*** Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/deer.html>
- ***Living with Wildlife: Deer – The Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management.*** USDA. <http://icwdm.org/Publications/pdf/Deer/USDAlivingwithdeer.pdf>
- ***Animal Diversity Web: Mule Deer.*** University of Michigan. http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Odocoileus_hemionus/
- ***Mammals of Washington.*** Burke Museum. <http://www.burkemuseum.org/research-and-collections/mammalogy/collections/mamwash/>