

# Making Your Landscape Deer Resistant

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## Deer – Oh, Dear!

Talk about a love/hate relationship! Seeing the tawny doe and her newborn fawn nestled in the corner of your yard just melts your heart. And the magnificent, muscled buck striding across the road like he is King of the Universe - what a beauty! But wake up and find your favorite ornamental tree broken in half or the flowers you so carefully planted scattered to the winds and your mind may begin to see red!

So how can we co-exist with these animals that not only aren't going away but seem to be more prevalent each year? If your answer is to build an 8' fence around your property, you get an A+ but not everyone wants to live within a fortress. So how does one manage a fence-free garden that can thrive despite the deer? Although there is no such thing as a deer proof garden, let's look at a few strategies that may help.

Lucky are those who have a dog companion, preferably a large one. The major predator of deer is the coyote and, since dogs smell like coyotes, the presence of domesticated dogs can be a deterrent. Encourage your dog to walk the perimeter of your garden and relieve him/herself in those areas.

Deer are fearful of novel objects, but they become ineffective once the deer find the fixture is harmless. Scarecrows, bright lights, fluttering ribbons, noise machines, whistles, predator urine or droppings are all only useful for a short period. Only motion sensor detecting sprayers appear effective by applying a physical sensation with the startle response.

Barriers can be used, including solid fencing, for discouraging deer. Cedar posts can be secured close together. Planted in vines, they eventually disappear into the landscape. One gardener found a sturdy layer of latticed rebar attached to an existing concrete wall disrupted the animals from entering the property while allowing visual transparency to the landscape behind. To fence out a small area, such as a rose garden or blueberry patch, a crosshatch of 100 lb. test monofilament fishing line can be tied to sturdy 5' stakes or strung through existing trees. Deer can't detect it until the feel of the line startles them to back away. Cattle guards are useful in some situations but need to be 7' wide and 10-14' long so deer can't jump them. Naturally, fencing on either side of the guard is a must. A solar powered electric fence can work well but not if you have a neighborhood of children or curious neighbors who may accidentally receive a shock.



No, these arbor vitae are not pruned to look like that. This is a classic example of deer damage, where they have grazed on the plants as high up as they can reach. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

Mini barriers are another possibility to keep deer from rutting or eating on a newly planted tree. Encircle the plant in a cage 5' high and staked to the ground. These can be built yourself or purchased commercially. Some people use netting draped over individual plants, but deer can break through that with their hooves and songbirds sometimes become entangled. The netting also needs to be reattached several times to accommodate plant growth.

Deer-repellant sprays such as Liquid Fence, Deer Out, Plantskydd, or Bobbex can be effective if your yard has low to moderate deer activity. Timing is crucial for success. Remember to spray plants before the deer have gotten an initial tasty bite or they may be more persistent in trying to get at it again. Alternate between a couple of products so the deer don't get used to one stinky smell. Read the instructions on the package to determine how often you will need to spray.

Think about what you plant to reduce the deer's likelihood of selecting your yard over the one down the street. Deer enjoy lush foliage and high-water content plants such as *Hosta* and daylilies. Early spring bulbs like tulips and *Crocus* are hard for them to resist. Fruiting and berry producing plants are another favorite.

What deer are less likely to be attracted to are plants with strong flavors such as herbs and heavily scented ones. Fuzzy or hairy leaves as well as prickly plants can also be unattractive. Ferns and grasses often are left alone if other more palatable meals are available.



Look to your WSU extension service, reliable sources online and in publications from experts for deer resistant plants in your area. Rutgers University in New Jersey has published a very helpful online guide called “Landscaping Plants Rated by Deer Resistance”. Here alphabetically listed plants are categorized from A to D, with A being rarely damaged and D being frequently severely damaged. [Landscape Plants Rated by Deer Resistance \(Rutgers NJAES\)](#)

Check out Karen Chapman CPH (Certified Professional Horticulturist’s) book *Deer-Resistant Design: Fence-Free Gardens that Thrive Despite the Deer* which gives tips and strategies from thirteen gardens around the country to manage deer pressure, and a chapter exploring deer-resistant containers. Chapman emphasizes that deer are creatures of habit and learning their routes and routines can help you design for better deer management by using deer resistant plants from the level A and B categories listed above. Having a landscape of carefully mixed varieties of textures and heights helps hide minor deer damage, and the use of barriers and non-edible focal points (water features, containers, and structures) can help re-route deer.

Other informational sources include the Washington State Fish and Wildlife’s deer management article [Living with wildlife: Deer | Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife](#) and the WSU publication “Living with Deer” by Skagit County Master Gardener Everett Chu ([Deer-resistant Garden \(wsu.edu\)](#)) lists many deer resistant plants for our area.

One last message about feeding deer: Please don’t! It can lead to an increase in vehicle strikes by luring them into human environments; decreases the deer’s natural fear of humans, leading to dangerous deer-human interactions; and concentrates deer at feeding sites, increasing the risk of spreading diseases such as adenovirus hemorrhagic disease (AHD). And respect your neighbors’ gardens by not enticing deer into the area.



A young cherry tree stripped of all its leaves and broken by deer. *Photo by Susan Moulton / WSU Skagit County Extension.*

## **Resources**

- “Landscape Plants Rated by Deer Resistance”, Rutgers University New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. [Landscape Plants Rated by Deer Resistance \(Rutgers NJAES\)](#)
- “Living with Wildlife: Deer”, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. [Living with wildlife: Deer | Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife](#)
- “Deer Resistant Garden”, Everett Chu, Skagit County Master Gardener, Ask the Master Gardener column, Skagit Valley Herald, March 10, 2017. [Deer-resistant Garden \(wsu.edu\)](#)
- *Deer-Resistant Design: Fence-Free Gardens that Thrive Despite the Deer*, Karen Chapman, Timber Press, 2019.