

Gardening with Bambi

You just moved to a new home in the country and spent the day planting roses, petunias, and a flowering crabapple. Everything looks so beautiful and you go to bed that night tired, but happy and proud. The next morning you step outside to admire your blooming beauties and ... oh, the horror. All the blooms are gone, the tender shoots on the crabapple have disappeared, and there are unmistakable footprints everywhere.

An adult deer requires 5 to 10 pounds of forage each day. Since they usually travel in small family groups, the amount of foliage necessary to satisfy a passing family can be devastating to a garden. Do not despair – you can have a garden and also enjoy those big-eared, brown-eyed visitors. There are many tactics for keeping deer from eating your garden; most have a limited effect, but there are a few worth trying.

1. Hang bars of deodorant soap (Lifebuoy is usually the one of choice) in susceptible plants. This may work for a few days but deer will soon become accustomed to the soap and then they will ignore it.
2. Sprinkle human hair around the plants or hang in pouches. See tactic #1.
3. Spray lion urine or spread lion dung around your plants. The first problem is obtaining the product. The second problem is that you also won't want to go near your plants.
4. Use a device that sprays water when motion is detected. You will need many of these devices and it is reported that they drench more humans and pets than deer. This may be effective for a few visits, but the surprise will soon wear off on the deer. You, however, will continue to be surprised each time you trigger the device.
5. Play a radio at all times in your garden, frequently changing the station between music and talk shows. The deer will get used to this long before you and your neighbors do.
6. Put food out for the deer and they will eat the food but leave the plants alone. The actual result is that you will receive many more deer visits. Somehow the word gets out for free food and deer miles away will make your yard a stopping point. In case you are wondering, this method also does not work for squirrels, stray cats, or teenage boys.
7. Use a commercial or homemade repellent. Some repellents have some effect, especially those which contain an ingredient called Bitrex. The problem is that it must be repeatedly applied, especially during a rainy season.
8. Adopt a large dog. This tactic can have some effect. However, you must let the dog have free rein of the garden. If the dog is chained, the deer will soon learn exactly how long the chain is. Of course, the dog must also stay out all night in order to be effective. So if you are likely to knuckle under when the dog whines at the door, forget this tactic. Keep in mind that some large dogs will also cause damage in the garden.

9. Build a fence. This is probably the most effective measure you can take if the fence is at least eight feet high. A shorter fence may work if the area is small. If you do not wish to fence in your entire yard, consider fencing one area and put all your susceptible plants there.
10. Plant deer-resistant plants. This can also be very effective. You have the pleasure of a garden, albeit somewhat limited in variety, and the pleasure of visiting wildlife. A combination of a fenced area containing susceptible plants and deer resistant plants in the other areas of the yard can be very rewarding.

What kinds of plants are deer-resistant? Unfortunately, there is no ironclad answer to this question. Deer from area to area and from year to year will eat different things. Fawns will often try just about anything and unlike human mothers, deer mothers just stand back and let them learn from experience. In general, plants that have a strong aroma (herbs, marigolds), fuzzy leaves (lamb's ear, rudbeckia), toxicity (daffodils, foxglove), or prickly parts such as thorns, spines, and needles (spruce, barberry) are safe from deer damage. Many native plants are also a good bet.

The best tactic is to try a particular plant in your yard before buying several. This requires more patience, but saves time and money in the long term. Set a plant still in its pot out in the yard and check it each day to see if the deer have visited. Once you are sure they have been by and left it alone, it is safe to plant.

So now that you have some ideas about how to deal with Bambi, be forewarned that Bambi's little friend Thumper eats plants too...

References (some contain lists of deer-resistant plants)

Drzewucki, Vincent Jr. *Gardening in Deer Country*. New York: Brick Tower Press, 1998.

Sunset Western Garden Book. Menlo Park, California: Sunset Publishing Corp., 2001.

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[Deer-resistant Ornamental Plants](#) Oregon State University Extension Service, EC1440, July 1994.