



PREVENTING DEER DAMAGE IN THE HOME LANDSCAPE

By Vickie Wallace and Alyssa Siegel-Miles
UConn Extension, August 2016

White-tailed deer have become more common in the United States over the last 100 years. Fewer predators and wooded areas have fueled their population growth in urban and suburban areas. Deer are gentle, but cause problems because they eat many plants that we often use in our landscapes.

KEY POINTS:

1. Use deer-resistant plants whenever possible.
2. Deer can be trained to avoid residential locations if we convince them the area is not safe and the available food sources are unappealing.

WHAT PROBLEMS DO DEER CAUSE?

- Deer are herbivores – they eat an average of 5-15 lbs. per day of leaves, twigs, acorns, and fruit.
- Deer eat many valuable plants, including endangered wildflowers and many we enjoy planting in our yards.
- Deer usually visit areas where they feel safe and can smell that other deer have visited.
- Some plants that deer tend not to eat, such as the invasive Oriental

bittersweet and Japanese barberry, take over forests and displace native plants. This destroys important food sources for beneficial wildlife, such as birds and butterflies.

- Deer sometimes strip bark off small trees and branches, or injure plants by rubbing their antlers against the bark of young trees.
- Deer host ticks that transmit tick-borne illnesses such as Lyme Disease and present a health risk to residents.



Deer rub on a young tree



Hosta (above) and Arborvitae (below), eaten by deer

Deer come to urban and suburban residences most often in winter, when forest food is in short supply, and in spring, when new growth is most tender and tasty for them. They especially enjoy eating young flower buds and well-watered or well-fertilized plants. While there are certain plants that deer prefer, they will eat almost anything to survive when their preferred foods are not available.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO KEEP DEER AWAY?

Deer can be trained to avoid residential locations if we convince them the area is not safe and the available food sources are unappealing. The most important way to discourage deer from causing damage in the landscape is to plant trees, shrubs, and perennials that deer prefer not to eat. However, no plant is completely deer proof (young deer do not know which plants taste good until they sample).

To keep deer away and protect landscape plants:

- **Use plants that deer do not prefer to eat** in the landscape (i.e. deer resistant plants). See below for a list of recommended plants.
- **Divide the landscape into zones.** Place the most deer resistant plants along the far edge of the property. Plants that are the most likely to be eaten by deer should be planted close to frequently used entrances or grown within a fenced in area.
- **Use fencing to restrict deer access** whenever possible. Deer can jump, so fences must be at least 8-feet high, with no more than 6-inch by 6-inch gaps, and must reach the ground.
- **Preserve young trees or shrubs** with protective materials, such as wire-mesh cylinders that surround the trunk, to discourage feeding and deer rub. Fishing line strung around specimen plants is an easy and inexpensive way to confuse and push away deer.
- **Use less fertilizer on landscape plants** if deer often visit a specific location. Deer favor lush, well-fertilized plants, but may avoid the same plants if they are less appetizing.
- **Apply repellents**, products that discourage deer from feeding because of an unpleasant taste or odor. Cover the plant from the ground level upward to at least six feet. Reapply repellents on a regular basis as new growth emerges and after rainfall.
- **Use motion-activated sprinklers, lights, or noisemakers** (e.g. radios or whistles), where appropriate, to startle deer and scare them away. Success with these type of deterrents is typically short-lived. Deer become accustomed to and recognize the devices if they are not moved or altered in pattern that keeps deer constantly wary and concerned.

DEER RESISTANT PLANTS FOR THE HOME LANDSCAPE

Deer Avoid Plants:

- with thorns or prickles on leaves or stems;
- with strong scents and bitter flavors (ex. herbs);
- that are poisonous or have thick sap;
- that have hairy or fuzzy leaves.

Ornamental grasses and ferns are nearly all highly resistant to deer damage.

TREES AND SHRUBS:

Bayberry (Morella/Myrica pensylvanica)
Boxwood (Buxus sempervirens)
Chokeberry, red (Aronia arbutifolia)
Dogwood, kousa (Cornus kousa)
Eastern red-cedar (Juniperus virginiana)
Maple, sugar (Acer saccharum)
Pieris, Japanese (Pieris japonica)
Pine, eastern white (Pinus strobus)
Serviceberry, Downy (Amelanchier arborea)
Sumac, fragrant (Rhus aromatica)
Summersweet (Clethra alnifolia)
Sweetbells (Eubotrys racemosa)
Sweetfern (Comptonia peregrina)
Sweetgale (Myrica gale)

PERENNIALS:

Adam's needle (Yucca filamentosa)
Bleeding heart (Dicentra spectabilis)
Bleeding heart, fringed (Dicentra eximia)
Catmint (Nepeta sp.)
Ginger, European (Asarum europaeum)
Ginger, wild (Asarum canadense)
Indigo, false (Baptisia australis)
Lamb's ears (Stachys byzantina)
Sage, ornamental (Salvia x sylvestris)
Sage, Russian (Perovskia atriplicifolia)
Yarrow (Achillea mill. 'Sunny Seduction')