



Tips and Techniques for Landscaping with Deer

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The problems with deer extend beyond the suburban landscapes that deer damage. When native habitats are overpopulated with deer there are severe impacts to the vegetation from the browsing activity of deer and the rubbing of the antlers of the male deer. In some areas there is little vegetation between the ground and about five feet high. This in turn reduces habitat for many other woodland creatures including rabbits, lizards, snakes and many birds.

Deer populations are affected by the availability of food (which is affected by weather), shelter, and water in natural cycles. In very cold or dry periods, deer starve and females will not reproduce or will abort or absorb the fetus. Up to half the population of deer can be lost at one time. When conditions are good, females will have three fawns instead of one or two, and juvenile females will bear young their first spring. Populations may double in one year. The most important thing that we can do to control deer is not to feed them! Corn, hay, and other food supplements provide sufficient nutrient levels to keep birth rates artificially high in all seasons.

Things to remember about deer: No plant is truly deer proof. If deer are hungry they will eat anything. Deer that have died from starvation have been found with full stomachs of twigs and dead leaves.

Deer most often browse just the tips of plants. New growth of even deer resistant plants often lacks the strong flavor of the mature plant, so they may be browsed. Plants in nurseries and garden centers have been watered and fed to grow quickly, so even deer resistant plants will be browsed when newly planted. Keep new beds protected by netting, sprays, or electric wires. Also, when deer resistant plants are continually overwatered or overfed, even with natural fertilizers, they will be tastier to deer. Water only as much as the plants truly need.

Deer are creatures of habit. When they experience foods that do not make them sick, they will eat them again. When they enter an area and are not bothered, they will go there again. Young deer learn the food trail systems from their mothers. Deer trails are scented by glands in the feet, so that other deer know that this is a safe route. Deer rely heavily on their keen sense of smell, excellent hearing and 270 degree visual field. As a prey species, their main goal is "to not get eaten".

Water provided for birds or other animals may become an important source for the deer in your area and may bring them to your garden. Consider moving water supplies to protected areas.

Look at your neighbor's yards to see what plants the deer are not browsing.

Fences and Netting: Deer won't tend to jump where they can't see, so a 6 foot wood privacy fence will keep them out. For wire or chain link fences to work they need to be at least 7 ½ feet and 8 feet is better. Wire strands can be run along the top of the fence to extend the height. A pregnant doe can jump a six foot fence from a standing position. Deer jump high, but not wide. Two shorter fences spaced four feet apart are expensive, but can work, if local codes don't allow a higher fence. A shrub line inside the fence or vines to obscure the view inside the fence can make a single, lower fence effective. Electric fences can be difficult to manage, dangerous for children and pets and easily jumped. A baited electric fence can be effective. Spread peanut butter at intervals on a 30 inch high wire. Deer taste the peanut butter and get a shock. They will avoid an area after being shocked. Black polypropylene fences are less expensive to install and barely visible from a distance. They should be secured to the ground at intervals to prevent deer from digging under. Stakes can be placed 12 feet apart. Deer will often be deterred by a one by four board placed along the top of a shorter fence. This acts as a visual barrier and they are concerned about damaging their legs if they don't clear the top board. Deer will go under fences if there is a large enough opening

Deer netting can be placed over plants which are very attractive to deer such as vegetables. The netting comes in many sizes; 7 foot by 100 feet, 14 by 14, etc. The netting should be held up over the plant material by PVC pipe, stakes or rebar. Deer will push it down and eat the plants through the netting if it is laid on top of the plants. We fashion rebar hoops from 3/8 inch rebar and pin the netting down on each side with U-shaped soil staples (jute staples). The netting can also be used to fashion fences around tomatoes or peppers or larger vegetables. Netting should be installed fairly taut so that deer can not become entangled in it and break their legs. If handled with some care the netting should last for several planting seasons.

Repellants and Deterrents: Commonly used repellants include soap, garlic, hot pepper wax, predator urine, blood meal, Milorganite, or rotten eggs to mask the flavor of normally desirable plants. The goal is to essentially train the deer not to feed in an area. These sprays vary in the amount of time they stay on the plants and usually need to be reapplied after heavy rains. All have varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the deer population and amount of natural forage present. Deer have eaten my hot pepper plants and peppers; soap and predator urine have not worked at all for me. **Deer Off**, **Deer Scram**, and **Liquid Fence** are all readily available formulas. Repellants must be applied to all newly planted material. Avoid sprays which contain Thiram, a toxic product. It is not safe on edible crops, so read the labels!

Liquid Fence has worked well for us at Lake Austin Spa Resort. We buy the concentrate in quarts and spray at least every two weeks. Keep the new growth treated to prevent browsing. Here's a home recipe for repellant – Mix 2 tablespoons of hot pepper sauce, 1 tablespoon liquid dish soap, 1 teaspoon garlic powder with one gallon of water. This may burn tender plants.

Some gardeners have had success with white plastic bags tied to posts or other garden structures. It is thought to mimic the white flash of the deer's tail when in distress. Move the bags around periodically to keep this working. Aluminum pie tins that clang may also frightened the deer. (But may annoy the neighbors as well!) Motion-controlled sprinklers, such as **ScareCrow**, will work if they are moved around with some frequency. Make sure your houseguests know about it and be careful not to soak the postal carrier!

Dogs may be one of the best deterrents you can have. Not all breeds work equally well. Dogs with a strong herding or guarding instinct will probably be more successful. Doberman Pinschers, Great Pyrenees, Rottweilers, Collies, Border Collies and German Shepherds would all tend to be effective at keeping deer away, but I have seen Jack Russell terriers do the job with great gusto!

Resources

www.wirelessdeerfence.com – Battery-operated posts for repelling deer. I have found them to be the most effective of this type. They are not sold in stores, only available on the web.

Deerproofing Your Yard and Garden by Rhonda Massingham Hart. Storey Books, Pownal, Vermont 05261
www.storey.com “Environmentally responsible deer control techniques that really work.”

www.npsot.org/plant_lists/deer_resistant.html – List by Patti Simons with deer resistant plants for Texas. The most complete list I have found.

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/publications/repellents.html> – Web page with homemade repellant info.

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