

Deer in the Yard

One of the most aggravating problems for many is damage caused by deer and elk feeding on landscape plants and rubbing antlers on tree trunks to remove antlers velvet. Unfortunately, these animals are often present in our yards due to human encroachment into their habitat and a lack of food during the winter months.

How to mitigate this damage is a common question where the only absolute answer is to not move into areas where deer and elk are present. Otherwise, the next best solution is a well built fence at least seven feet tall. Fencing an entire yard is sometimes cost prohibitive. A possible compromise is to fence smaller areas where plants are especially important such as the garden and orchard. A good dog that roams the yard can help keep wild animals away also.

Where fencing and dogs are not possible, a few other options exist. One is to use various deer deterrents. One that often works well in warmer weather is a special garden sprinkler that has a motion detector attached to it. Something walks past it, including humans, and gets wet. Deer seem to not be fond of this. Other deterrents include applying commercially available coyote urine and repellents to plants, and electronic devices that make loud noises when approached. These can be effective, but deer and other herbivores may quickly adjust to these distraction. Repellents also have to be reapplied often to be effective. It is a good idea to rotate products used to slow the time it takes deer and elk to adjust.

Another option is to carefully select landscape plants resistant to browsing. Some of our most commonly planted species such as flowering pears, burning bush, Austrian pine, tulips, many broadleaved evergreens and crabapples are often “deer candy”. Many online resources are available listing plants resistance to browsing. Though, when comparing various lists, one will find that there is much disagreement as to how resistant a particular plant is. This could be due to personal observations of the list’s author, particular deer species present in the area the list was generated for and regional differences in plants available for deer to eat. The take-home message here is that there are no absolutes in how likely a plant will be fed upon. Additionally, one of the best bits of wisdom I heard from a wise horticulturist pertaining to what plants a deer or elk may eat included that “It just depends on how hungry the animal is. Plants considered very resistant will be fed on in cases of extreme hunger.”

In some instances state or federal government entities have mitigation programs that offer assistance in reducing deer populations and other options. These are most often available for businesses. Colorado State University has a useful factsheet about keeping deer out of the yard. It can be found at: <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/ptlk/2302.html>. Rutgers University additionally has put together a relatively extensive list of deer resistant plants. It can be found at: <http://njaes.rutgers.edu/deerresistance/>.