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GARDENING IN SPITE OF DEER

By Carol Kleis

The Hopewell Valley Deer Management Task Force recognizes the serious challenges residents face when landscaping and gardening in the midst of a growing deer population. A deer's primary diet is tender shoots, twigs, and leaves of trees and shrubs. Over the winter months, deer can easily lose 15-30 percent of their body weight, and they must recover with the spring green-up just as we are planting our newly sprouting shrubs and flowers. This means that, by their very nature, deer are in direct conflict with our landscaping plans.

How can we prevent our flower beds from becoming a deer buffet? Using plants deer prefer not to eat is a good start. We have all discovered to our great distress plants that deer love to munch such as hostas, lilies, hydrangea, yews, and even cultivated rose bushes just coming into bloom. Fortunately, lists of plants they don't like are available at most gardening centers. When planning your garden, you will save headache and heartbreak (and money) by consulting the list of plants rated "A" by Rutgers University for relative deer resistance. If you cannot find this list at your local plant center, go online to <http://njaes.rutgers.edu/deerresistance>.

Of course, most landscape designs in areas where deer are a problem venture much further down that list, with plenty of B-rated and even C- and D- rated plants. Taking a crack at broadening the flower bed assortment with less resistant plants requires one of three strategies: Repel them; scare them; or keep them out.

Repellents are available at our local gardening centers or can be homemade from garlic and egg or other odors or tastes unpalatable to deer. Sprays can be effective, but gardeners must commit to reapplication all season, and repellent labels should be checked before using on food crops. Products such as Liquid Fence, Deer Off, or Deer Out (which smells like mint) are available locally. All claim they dry odorless and once plants are through their spring growth spurts, these products only need to be reapplied every month or so. A variation to spraying plants is a ribbon from Deer Stopper that comes already infused with the organic repellent. You can check out this method at the Mercer Educational Gardens on Federal City Road.

Scare tactics are another line of defense. By nature, deer are always on the alert for predators, so if you can convince the deer your lawn is dangerous, they may willingly move on to safer areas. In time deer adjust to the threat, so it is most effective to go back and forth between the following methods: Motion activated sprinklers such as Scare Crow direct a stream of water at the deer; aluminum foil plates or CDs hung from branches to startle deer; threatening odors such as bloodmeal (often found in fertilizers), or Deer Scram (to a deer this smells like dead deer even though it is not made from dead deer. The product is odorless to humans).

If your neighbors or your own bedroom windows are not too close, deterrents such as flashing lights (Nite Guard Solar-Powered Night Predator Light) or alarm sounds (Deer Chaser Electronic

Deer Repellent) can be effective. And while many a family's pet dogs have been recruited into deer control, few seem to sign up for a second hitch.

Keeping deer out through fencing usually involves 7-foot tall fencing, although electric, slanted, or double designs can be used at lower levels. Check our local zoning laws before installing. If you have a very small garden, a 4-foot fence might work, since deer do not like to enter small confined areas. Locally, our garden centers carry a product called Deer X, which is a polypropylene mesh that is more flexible and easy to install, and is less visible than traditional fencing. It is worth a visit to Mercer Educational Gardens Native Plant section to observe the temporary fencing system that was installed to stop winter deer damage to trees and shrubs while allowing total public access in the summer. Another method for keeping deer out of specific areas entails laying and then staking chicken wire flat around the perimeter of your garden. Deer don't like to walk on it, and it is not an eyesore like a chicken-wire fence.

A final word about trees and shrubs: In addition to eating plants, male deer can devastate young trees and bushes by rubbing their antlers on them, particularly in the fall. This activity strips off the bark, breaks small branches and can entirely girdle and eventually kill the plant. Tree tubes, wire mesh, polypropylene fence around the individual shrubs or young trees are usually needed.

Once you find the right combination of strategies, you can enjoy your blossoming yard without providing fast food to quick-footed deer.

Carol Kleis is a member of the Hopewell Valley Deer Management Task Force