

## Oh Dear, Oh Deer....

By: *Joe Baltrukonis, Ramsey County Minnesota Master Gardener*  
July 2008



Do you have a beautiful home landscape that is turning into a salad bar for the local mob of deer? Each deer can eat between 4 and 10 pounds of plant material daily.

There are only three practical solutions for our local deer problems:

### (1) **Grow plants that are unappetizing to deer.**

Plants with strong flavors (alliums, sages) or those with hairy leaves or vicious thorns are often unattractive to deer. However, deer do love roses. Ornamental grasses are usually not touched, but hungry or starving deer will nibble or eat almost any living, green plant. The University of Minnesota Yard and Garden brief, "Coping with Deer in the Home Landscape" (<http://www.extension.umn.edu/yardandgarden/ygbriefs/h462deer-coping.html>) and the article, "Oh Deer, What to Plant?", Yard and Garden News, Feb 1 '06 (<http://www.extension.umn.edu/yardandgarden/YGLNews/YGLNews-Feb0106.html#deer>) list many plants that deer do not like. Unfortunately many of these are poisonous to humans as well as deer, so must be used with care. For springtime bulbs, I have found that daffodils (which are in fact poisonous) are avoided by deer and rabbits; tulips and crocus are eaten. Mixing deer resistant plants with delicious plants is not recommended; the resistant plants will be trampled as the deer rush to eat the good stuff.

### (2) **Erect a fence or barrier.**

For very small areas with short plants, a four foot fence will work; deer will not jump into a small enclosed area. To protect shrubs and trees, use tall circular wire enclosures. Electric fences are impractical in an urban area where children are present. Benner's Gardens, and other companies, manufacture a durable, minimally visible, plastic mesh fence that is about 7-8 feet high and will keep deer out. It is possible for deer to jump over 8 foot fences if they are frightened, but usually this height works. Sometimes a six foot solid stockade fence will work, because deer don't like to jump when they can't see the other side or can't see where they will land.

Dr. Leonard Perry, a horticulturist at the University of Vermont, recommends using strong monofilament line, strung on supports at two foot intervals up to a height of 10 feet. Deer have poor eyesight and are startled when they bump into the line. Some people are successful with only one strand of heavy monofilament line at the two or three foot level. Dr. Perry recommends that the monofilament lines be flagged with cloth strips, since the deer do not see well and might try jumping through. The National Zoo has successfully used this method.

Others use a barrier of simple chicken wire, around 8 feet wide, laid directly on the ground around their gardens. Deer do not like the feel of the wire and hesitate to get their feet caught in the wire.

### (3) **Use a repellent.**

A Master Gardener friend in Wisconsin used to send hubby out into the dark of each evening, when neighbors could not see, to mark the territory. Sadly, the modern deer has become used to the smell of humans, and the solution had limited effectiveness. In a University of Connecticut study,

commercially available repellants generally tested at less than 50% effectiveness. Always read and follow label instructions for best results. Re-application of repellants after rain or time period may be needed. Some types of spray repellants contain a chemical that is extremely bitter to the taste, others smell bad (at least to deer).

Hinder repellant was one product rated highly by Consumer Reports. Another product that does seem to work well is Plantskyd. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has found it to be effective. It is produced from pig or cow blood. It is hard to dissolve and is a bloody mess to mix up, but lasts for up to three months. A premixed form is available, but we have not found it for sale locally. A couple of Master Gardeners reported that their pet dogs or neighborhood dogs were attracted to the treated plants, especially right after applying. Master Gardeners also reported that, after leaving the spray containers of prepared Plantskyd out in hot areas, the containers exploded. I wonder if the product fermented in the heat? Mix up only what you will use up right away.

Bars of highly perfumed deodorant soap, cut up and placed into mesh bags and placed onto stakes every 10 feet around the property, are effective for some gardeners. Mesh bags full of dog hair or dirty (before shampoo) human hair can work; I have read of one person mulching his garden with hair from a barber shop.

A home made, but scientifically untested remedy calls for mixing a couple of eggs into one or two cups of water in a blender. Add this to a gallon of water and spray onto foliage. The egg mixture does not wash off easily. However, it does stink, and neighbors might object. Re-apply a few times during the season.

Milorganite fertilizer (spread amongst your plantings), wolf urine, mountain lion urine, bobcat urine, or coyote urine can also be tried.

Since deer do get used to unusual smells, it may be best to rotate the use of different repellants on a monthly or bi-monthly basis and try applying the repellants to different locations in your garden or property. To insure complete and continuing protection of your plants, be diligent in re-applying the products at package recommended intervals.

A pet dog, the bigger the better, in the yard will chase away deer.

I have seen two motion activated devices for \$80-\$100, Scarecrow Sprinkler Repellent and Havahart Spray Away, which shoot a brief stream of water towards an animal intruder. Unfortunately, deer may get used to these devices in time. Try moving scare devices every few days.

Good Luck with your deer problems. Let me know what works for you.

### **Other References:**

Deerproofing Your Yard and Garden, Rhonda M. Hart, Storey Publishing Co., 2005

*Reducing Deer Damage to Home Gardens and Landscape Plantings*, Paul D. Curtis, Cornell Cooperative Extension, <http://www.dnr.cornell.edu/ext/chdp/Reducingdeerdamage.htm>