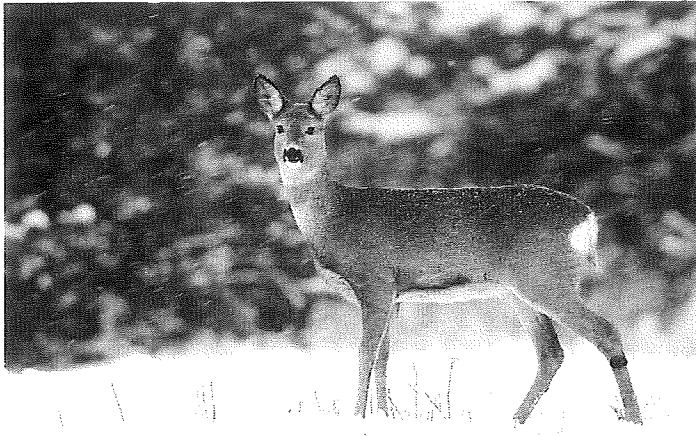


Smart Gardening to Deter Deer

Rebecca Finneran and Sarah Rautio, Michigan State University Extension



It can be heart-wrenching to look out at your prized garden and find your plants have been completely nibbled away. Gardeners have been plagued by deer damage for generations, but why are we seeing more damage than ever to our home landscapes?

As natural habitat is lost to new roads, homes and buildings, deer begin to spend more time in areas populated by humans, such as your backyard. Deer are just as happy foraging in your yard as they would in a natural area. In fact—they may actually prefer what you have planted over their natural diet!

Understanding deer behavior, learning how to divert attention away from your plants and making the garden difficult to access are the best steps you can take towards smart gardening with deer.

Plants deer love

Most deer damage happens during the night, but deer will feed anytime they are hungry on a wide variety of plants. No plant is absolutely deer-proof. There are some deer favorites you may want to avoid.

Evergreen shrubs such as our native cedars (landscape *Arborvitae*) and yews are some of their wintertime favorites. They will also browse on rhododendron, winter creeper, holly and false cypress. They also like small deciduous trees, such as Japanese maples, and many ornamental shrubs including roses. Herbaceous plants that hold their leaves through winter such as *Heuchera* will also be a target for hungry deer.

In spring and summer, deer will seek out lush herbaceous plants like tulips, *Hosta* and daylilies. They may eat newly planted annuals or just yank them out of the ground while taste-testing. In late summer, male deer use the trunks of woody plants that are 2 inches wide or less to rub off their antler velvet. These “buck rubs” can create lasting scars and structural weakness. Deer also love all parts of fruit trees, which makes it important to protect those trees year-round, particularly when they are young.

Make smart plant choices

The best defense against deer is to plant things they are known to dislike. Deer tend to be put off by fuzzy, coarse or “fern-like” foliage, and leaves or stems with strong odors or spines. Some plants less attractive to deer are lamb’s ears, hellebores, ornamental grasses, ferns, catmint, Russian sage, lavender and snakeroot. While deer love tulips, they tend to avoid other bulbs such as daffodil, allium, grape hyacinth and autumn crocus.



Some plants less attractive to deer are hellebores (left) and forsythia (right).

As for trees and shrubs, deer often avoid pines, spruces, larches, cypress and boxwood. In spring and summer, forsythia, weigelia, spirea and ninebark attract fewer deer. For late-season color, try callicarpa (beautyberry) or potentilla. More information about recommended species that are deer-resistant can be found on the Smart Gardening page at migarden.msu.edu.

Use repellants to show deer what is off limits

Using a variety of repellants can also be an effective tool to thwart deer browsing. Repellants use three techniques to deter deer—bad taste or scent and fear.

Bad taste and scent repellants often contain ingredients such as capsicum pepper, putrid egg solids and garlic. Fear repellants, on the other hand, contain scents that warn deer of predators, like coyote urine and animal remains.



Spray plants with repellent to deter deer browsing.

Rebecca Finneran, MSU Extension

Motion-sensing noise-makers and water scare tactics are another option. Coupling these devices with some of the repellants can send a clear message your garden is off limits.

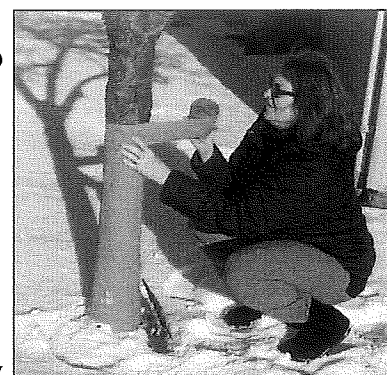
All repellants work to some degree, but deer can acclimate to one, so rotate them using several different types. Be consistent about reapplying to keep the repellent fresh. After consistently encountering your repellants, deer will change their traffic patterns to avoid your yard and you may be able to then reduce repellent use.

Unfortunately, repellants may not totally deter deer. Repellants lose their taste and scent from rainfall or irrigation. They also cannot protect new leaves and shoots that emerge after your application. In winter, deer are more desperate for food and may tolerate repellants. Your only option may be to cover or block deer from plants, shrubs and trees.

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Barriers that work

One sure-fire way to stop deer browsing is to fence your whole yard, which can be costly and otherwise undesirable. Physical barriers such as wraps, netting and small fencing are much more practical. Even though deer can leap over a 6-foot fence, they are sometimes reluctant to enter a smaller area like a fenced bed of Rhododendrons or yews.

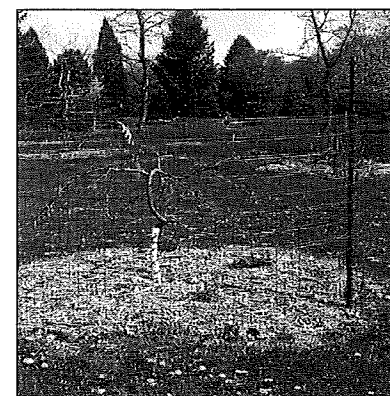


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Wrap a tree trunk with tree wraps to help avoid deer damage, including buck rubs.

Consider attaching netting to stakes with staples, twine or zip-ties to protect larger plants. Old tomato cages, wire-hanging baskets and milk crates can be anchored in place with tent stakes to cover small plants. Be sure the holes are small enough that they cannot squeeze their noses in between.

You can also protect young trees from buck rub by wrapping trunks with plastic or paper tree wraps. Be sure to occasionally replace wraps to avoid moisture build up or insect infestation. Young trees can also be protected with wire fence cages that are supported with stakes.



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Wire fencing can protect young trees from deer damage.

Take action now to avoid unwanted deer activity in your garden. Just remember these three smart gardening tips:

- Choose SMART plants that deer do not like.
- Apply SMART repellents to deter deer.
- Create SMART barriers to block deer.

For more information on a wide variety of Smart Gardening topics, visit www.migarden.msu.edu or call MSU's Lawn and Garden hotline at 1-888-678-3464.

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Species

Odocoileus virginianus

Family: Cervidae

Life Span

Highly variable; most live only **one to three years** in the wild, but can live **up to 15 years**.

Home Range

Home range size varies throughout the state and is dependent on available food and cover as well as the number of other deer in the area.

Habitat

Generally able to thrive in:

forests, grasslands, farmlands, backyards and city green spaces.

Average number of fawns

Twin fawns are most common for adults (more than 2 years old); yearling females typically have a single fawn.

Vocalizations

They will **grunt, bleat and snort.**

Appearance

Reddish-brown (summer) or grayish (winter) fur with a white patch on their throat. A fawn has white spots on its coat until about 4 months of age.

Male deer grow antlers every spring. Antler size is dependent on diet and age of the buck. White-tailed deer get their name from the white tail that they raise when startled.

Size

100 – 300 pounds;

Total body length is 5 to 7 feet.



White-tailed Deer

White-tailed deer are enjoyable to observe and hunt, but can become unwanted guests in residential settings.

Here are some tips for staying smart about deer: ►

Living with Deer

White-tailed deer are found in every county in Michigan and can easily adapt to their surroundings. Deer can be found in just about every habitat type, including urban and suburban areas.

Deer are active year-round and will move to different areas based on food availability. You may see an individual deer or a group of deer moving through an area. Deer breeding occurs in the fall, and during this time, the deer are often less wary of traffic or other human activities.

Does have their fawns the following spring in May or June. During the first weeks of a fawn's life, the mother will hide her young while she goes to find food. A fawn has very little scent and its spots create excellent camouflage, allowing it to remain well-hidden from predators. Does will often hide their fawns near residential areas or in backyards where predator activity is less likely due to the proximity to humans. If you find a fawn, leave it alone. The mother will be back to feed the fawn when she feels it is safe. She may leave her fawn unattended for eight to 12 hours at a time.

In urban and suburban areas, white-tailed deer will take advantage of gardens and landscaping for food. If you remove potential food sources and protect gardens with fencing, deer may move to other areas for food. NEVER intentionally feed or try to tame a white-tailed deer.

Hunting is one option communities may use to help manage deer populations in their area. If hunting isn't currently an option in your area, try some non-lethal deterrent methods to discourage deer. Examples of deterrents include fencing to keep deer out of a specific area, using noise and visual scare tactics, applying taste deterrents to ornamental plants, removing feed and making bird feeders inaccessible to deer. Try using multiple deterrents to keep the deer from becoming accustomed to one tactic.

Safe to enjoy from a distance.

Make loud noises to scare them away.

Apply barriers or fencing around gardens to keep deer out.

Repellents may deter deer from browsing ornamental plants.

Take down bird feeders or make them inaccessible to deer.

Preventing Conflicts with Deer at Home

Do not intentionally feed deer.



Remove or modify bird feeders to prevent deer from accessing the food.



Construct fences or put wiring around gardens or individual plants to protect from damage.



Use scare tactics to frighten deer away.



Try repellents or modify landscaping. Use plants that are less likely to be eaten by deer.



Leave fawns in the wild; it is not unusual to find a fawn by itself.

