

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the week
By Jann Dworsky
“A Cautionary Deer Tale”

At Lake Belton there are at least two communities where dozens of **white-tailed** deer can be seen as you drive thru their subdivisions. Visitors are delighted by this and stop to get an extremely close up look at deer. The deer are desensitized to humans and see us as no threat. For the last 15 years we have lived with deer in our landscape and until several years ago they did not come in the yard to eat our plants. There was plenty to eat in the woods and their taste buds preferred those things.

About 8 years ago the deer started to increase because several individuals in the community started to regularly feed them fairly large amounts. This extra food caused the deer population to increase and to depend on the people for food. In nature, doe deer have a certain range where they feed and don't travel out of this area. When the population increases you would think some of the deer would go to another area to feed, but according to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (**TPWD**) this is not true. Gradually more and more deer were born with many twins. They all stayed in the same area.

As long as the food supply was stable with plenty of forbs (select weeds) and browse (the leaves, stems and twigs of trees, brush and vines), the larger deer population was fine. When the drought started about 3 years ago the trouble began. With extremely limited amounts of rainfall in the area, the deer ate their entire available browse and the individuals feeding them could not make up this huge difference. By late summer the deer started becoming thinner and thinner. Some of the deer became so thin that their hipbones stood up prominently and their hair started to fall out in patches. Their native browse was gone and they had to eat anything they could find. Predictably our yards became the deer's salad bowl! They ate St. Augustine grass, any flower, especially roses, shrubs or small trees to the ground and all but a few of the things on my deer resistant list. Plants they avoided at first were nibbled a little every night until they were gone. Starvation changes behaviors!

The buck deer run in bachelor herds most of the year and only come into our area during the rut or breeding season. Some individuals are hand feeding these animals assuming they are tame, but **TPWD** warns that this is a dangerous habit. The antlers on a buck are his weapons and if he suddenly sees you as a threat, you would be badly hurt. Just a few years ago a local woman was gored by a buck and needed the hospital. Most of the year the does are passive, but when the doe deer have newborns they are very protective of them. Often deer would be in our yard and a fawn would be hidden and asleep nearby. Once when I let my Boston terrier outside, the doe charged my dog and bowled her expertly across the yard. When you think of deer legs, think of how much like a baseball bat they are!

Derrick Wolter, the TPWD biologist for Bell County, came out to give an evaluation of our deer population. First, he noticed that the deer had eaten all the

ashe juniper (cedar) trees as far as they could reach. This **browse line** indicated to him that the deer were very stressed and looking for anything to eat. You could easily see for a block with nothing but the trunks of trees to look at. No weeds, bushes or greenery were left. He estimated that we had 10 times the deer population usual in nature for a healthy herd.

Mr. Wolter stated, "All animals require habitat to survive. Habitat is comprised of food, cover, water and some amount of space. White-tailed deer are a species that have the ability to negatively influence plant communities in areas when their numbers exceed the carrying capacity of the habitat. This in turn negatively impacts the local deer population as well as other animals and plants found in the area of deer overpopulation. In nature, food supplies tend to cycle based on precipitation and food availability. When food is abundant animal numbers go up. When there is no food animal populations decline. Then, plants recover and it happens all over again. You don't see that happen when supplemental food is continually added to the equation. Deer numbers just keep going up."

The life cycle of the woods is ruined when any one species becomes overpopulated. Too many of any one species such as deer, mice, coyotes, lizards, snakes or rabbits all have the same effect; they ruin the balance of nature! All this could have been avoided if no one had fed the deer. Their population would have stayed much lower.

If your area has a few deer, encourage your neighbors or property owners association to have a restriction banning the feeding of deer. It helps your yard, but mostly it helps the deer maintain a healthy population that can avoid slow and painful starvation.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmqa@gmail.com