

Gardening with Deer

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

Many people like the sight of deer in their neighborhood. There is something to be said about the beauty of the animals and being able to observe them up close. I know people that throw out corn and provide a salt block for them. Some even provide washtubs of water through the hot thirsty months. When deer come closer and make your yard their home it is really neat, at first.

Master Gardeners are often asked what to plant that deer will not eat. I am afraid that the answer to that is that deer will eat just about anything when they are hungry enough. The availability of natural foods is dictated by the weather. Hot dry years drive deer into lush landscaped yards. That said I would like to talk about some things that you can do to deter deer. There are lots of plants that are considered "deer resistant". Notice I did not say "deer proof" and there are different strategies to deal with deer.

There are lots of places to go on the internet to research in your quest to find the solution to your deer problems. Two web sites that I recommend are the Texas A&M Horticulture Extension and the Native Plant Society of Texas. Both places provide lists of plants that are resistant to deer. You can also visit the Bell County Extension and pick up a list of resistant plants. When you plant deer resistant plants you are planting things that are not choice items on the deer menu; however, when pressed by circumstances deer will eat almost any plant. Other places on the web might not be specific to Texas but some of their ideas are also helpful as deer munching on landscape plants is a nationwide problem.

Perhaps the best deterrent is a fence. I know that this is not always the easiest thing nor cheapest to erect, but consider the money that you have invested in your landscape before you totally dismiss it. Fences should be at least 6 ½ feet tall. If you don't want to fence your entire property perhaps you could just fence off plants or areas that they are especially fond of. Fencing can include deer netting which should be attached to sturdy poles angled slightly out away from the garden. It should not be so close to allow vegetation to poke through it. The netting should be draped on the ground outside the protected area and secured with something like heavy rocks or metal stakes. They don't like the netting to touch their ears and do not like to walk on it. I found one source that recommended you put up the entire fence in one day. The theory being that if they learn how to defeat the fence as it is going up they will always be able to. If you choose to surround a tree or individual flower bed, be sure that there is not enough room for them to jump into and out of the fenced area. Large trees can be protected this way and when the bottom branches are no longer reachable the fence can be taken down.

Deer decide what they like by tasting it. There is a whole industry out there that provides chemical deterrents. Some are smelly and some taste bad. In nature plants usually give out signals that they are not good to eat with either bitter taste or strong odors. Plants also protect themselves with thorns or thick bristly unpalatable leaves. Things like garlic oil, predator urine, and hot pepper sauces are examples of the chemical deterrents that are available. There are also various recipes for home made concoctions out there. If you choose to try this approach it is recommended to try a double approach. Use a bad tasting one and a strong smelling one together. Multiple strong scents and tastes will confuse the deer's senses and cause it to leave. What is important is to prevent the deer from learning that a plant new to the landscape is palatable. Once they know, they know.

Watch the habits of the deer visiting your property. Determine if they always come from a certain direction and leave going a certain way and don't plant things in areas that they frequent that invite them to explore further. Finally I would like to talk about what is called camouflage gardening.

Camouflage gardening is essentially using plants that contain natural chemicals and have traits that prevent deer from wanting to eat them. In addition to strongly scented plants add things with thorns, tough bitter or bristly leaves, and plants with caustic and milky sap. In doing this you can create a scent barrier layered with a physical barrier and can then sneak in more desirable plants that are essentially hidden by the strong scents and thorns of the other plants. (When doing this keep in mind the PEOPLE who live in the area, homes with small children may not want to go this route.) The Native Plant Society of Texas website I listed above offers this strategy and provides an extensive list of aromatic plants and prickly plants. They recommend that you plant two unappetizing plants for every one "other" plant. With this strategy, you should also plant things that grow quickly and reproduce abundantly. When the deer do

get the munchies these plants will spring back quickly. In addition, recognize that this time of year most leaves are new, tender, highly nutritious, and deer will readily graze on them. Until things toughen up and mature you may want to combine some chemical deterrents with your camouflage strategy.

Deer are beautiful creatures. Enjoy their beauty and try to accept that part of the cost of seeing them up close may be some of your carefully grown plants.