

Oh Deer... Not My Garden!

How to keep deer away with barriers and natural deer repellents.



Nothing can be more picturesque than the sight of a deer loping through a field – unless it is on its way to the garden and chews your plants to the ground. That is when Bambi, the beautiful beast, turns into a destructive pest that you do not want around.

It is happening more and more as deer populations grow and humans build homes in what was once rural deer habitat.

What do deer eat? Anything vegetative, although they become less picky the hungrier they get. They also eat a lot. The average adult male can consume more than five pounds of food each day.

How do you keep deer out of the garden? No matter what method you choose, early intervention is best. It is much easier to deter deer before the herd has decided that your backyard is the best dining spot in town. There are several deer repellent options. They include:

Motion Activated Sprayers – Even deer do not like an unexpected cold blast of water. The sudden noise, movement and spray scares animals away, teaching them to avoid the area in the future.

Fencing – regular and/or electric fencing can be used to help deter deer from entering your garden or backyard. Check your local ordinance for restrictions on fence heights.

Deer Repellents – Anything that is sprayed, dusted or left around plants to ward off deer. There are a number of deer repellents that can be used. You could purchase some from the garden store or hardware department. If so, use these products according to their instructions. Alternatives to use at home include mothballs (hang in onion sacks from low branches at deer height), prickly branches (use as a fence or barrier), decaying fish heads, blood and bone meal, garlic, fabric softener, etc. Not all of these options are environmentally friendly – mothballs are fairly chemically active and commercial options might contain unacceptable chemicals, depending on what is in them. Then there is the smell factor; if some things are too smelly, you are unlikely to want to sit in your garden and enjoy it!

- Many commercially available deer repellents include things like deodorized fox urine, coyote urine, or wolf urine. What these products have in common are that they are: (1) urine (2) of something that eats deer. This opens up a number of other possible ways to repel deer:

Ultrasonic Devices – Which don't play music for deer's ears, but, instead emit noise that they cannot stand. Kind of like playing "Heavy Metal" for your grandmother who loves Lawrence Welk.

Netting – Great for small trees. Tree Netting allows them to get sun and rain, but keeps the deer away. Easy to use — safe and humane! Fishing line can also be used.

Grow plants that deer dislike – This comes with a big caveat – deer, if hungry or curious enough, will eat almost *anything*. As such, none of the plants that might deter them are a sure thing but you can at least try. Some of the plants that deer seem to not like include ornamental grasses, iris, foxgloves, black-eyed Susan, daffodils, California fuchsia, yucca, herbs and plants with a strong fragrance, such as sage, chives, lemon balm, bee balm, lavender, etc. They also dislike plants with thorns, such as purple coneflower but delicious roses seem to be a marked exception to that!

- Equally, be aware of which plants are likely to tempt deer to your yard. Plants such as tulips, chrysanthemum, hyacinths, roses, apples, beans, peas, raspberries, strawberries, sweetcorn, hosta, dogwood, fruit trees, Norway maple, yew, and azaleas positively radiate welcome signs to deer!^[2] Sometimes people plant these a long way from parts of the yard or garden to lure deer away; that's a risky strategy though as may just invite them to one end and encourage them to keep wandering through.

Other deer control methods include harvesting crops as early as possible, which gives deer less of an opportunity to dine on your vegetables and fruit. Grow "lure" crops a short distance from the plants you do want to protect (Be advised that a lure crop may backfire. While it may keep deer out of the corn for a season, providing food to deer will keep them coming back and in greater numbers, which may ultimately worsen the problem.)

The scent of humans or dogs used to be enough to drive away the hungriest of deer, but now deer are used to having us around, so hanging panty hose stuffed with human hair – an old-time remedy – no longer does the trick. More and more gardeners are turning to repellents. Deer repellents smell bad and taste worse, which is why they work. Their effectiveness depends on how much feeding pressure the deer face – how hungry they are – or how attractive your plants are to them.

It is hard to sort out which repellent to buy. Some studies recommend one thing while another one says something completely different. The best thing to do is experiment yourself and find out what deer in your area dislike. Keep in mind that what works can vary from year to year. Deer can become used to repellents, which means what first was a powerful deterrent could become less so over time. That is why it can be a good idea to rotate their use.

Repellents can range from a 99 cent bar of deodorant soap (Dial or Lifebuoy, which you hang near your plants by drilling a hole in the soap and attaching string.) to spray on applications that feature coyote urine. You can even make your own homemade repellent. Blend two eggs and a cup or two of cold water at high speed. Add this mixture to a gallon of water. Let stand for 24 hours. Re-apply as needed.

How often you have to apply repellents depends on the time of year, the amount of rain you're receiving (the more rain, the less effective the repellent is as it washes off), how anxious the deer are for food, as well as what type of deer are foraging on your property. Depending on the repellent used, you may have to apply it every couple of weeks or just every couple of months.

Some repellents are inappropriate for food crops. Repellents will not just repel the deer, but you too by making the plants and their fruits or vegetables taste bad. (If you can avoid the fruit or the vegetable, you can spray the rest of the plant and not damage the food.)

When applying deer repellents, always read the product label. Usually you will need to apply when its 40°F or warmer and your plants are dry. Avoid spraying when it is windy, as you will get more on you than on your plants. If treating young trees, apply the repellent on the entire tree. Older trees may only need treatment on new growth. Treat all trees up to six feet above the maximum expected snow depth. You may also need to reapply frequently especially after rain or irrigation.