

Keep Your Landscape Deer Free

Deer damage to ornamental plants is an increasing problem. Deer populations in neighborhoods have grown rapidly due to abandoned farms, hunting restrictions and suburban sprawl. And they are dining on expensive suburban landscapes – especially in areas with heavy snowfall in the woods. In those areas, front and backyard plantings can serve as easy winter forage.

“Deer are selective feeders that eat leaves from flowers, shrubs and ornamental trees,” explains Tchukki Andersen, staff arborist with the Tree Care Industry Association. “Damage to larger trees can extend up to 7 feet off the ground.”

In some areas, deer damage peaks in winter when snow cover reduces the food supply. Most areas with overpopulated deer herds experience problems year-round. The availability of natural food sources and the taste preferences of individual deer make deer-proofing a difficult task in many areas.

“Deer will eat almost any plant rather than starve,” says Andersen, “so damage control measures will be needed in addition to careful plant selection. Use of fencing and repellents can help control deer damage to landscapes.”

A fence is the most effective control against deer damage. An 8-foot fence is generally sufficient to deter deer, and lower fences can work if they slant away from your yard. Tree protectors or shelters also prevent deer from browsing on young trees. Made of polypropylene tubing, plastic tree wrap or woven-wire mesh cylinders, netting can be used to protect individual or group plantings. The netting can be left on year-round if it’s attached loosely at the base to allow for plant growth, but should be monitored frequently.

Repellents may help deter deer, but they do not eliminate damage completely. Homemade repellents include rotting eggs (mix two eggs with a gallon of water and spray the mixture on ornamentals). The eggs rot on the plants and the smell repels deer. Human hair hung in mesh bags makes a simple repellent. Hang the hair bags on the outer branches of trees about a yard apart, and replace them monthly. Bars of strong-smelling soap hung in the same way will also work. This is a good way to make use of all those aromatic Christmas gift soaps you don’t plan to use. Repellents containing predator urine or spray-on, soap-based mixtures usually only last a few weeks, depending on the weather.

Once deer taste your garden, it is difficult to rid them of the habit. Replacing your current mix of trees and shrubs with plants that are less appealing will help move the herd along to other sites. The Tree Care Industry Association recommends planting trees that have a history of surviving areas of heavy deer activity, such as:

Best trees

Bottlebrush buckeye, downy serviceberry, shadbush, Allegheny serviceberry, pinion pine, Chinese paper birch, ‘heritage’ heritage birch, paper birch, Japanese false cypress, Japanese cedar and Colorado blue spruce.

Best shrubs and climbers

Larger, tall shrubs tend to withstand deer browsing better than low-growing ones because they have more leaves, making them able to withstand some defoliation, and taller plants are out of reach. Try these shrubs: bearberry, pawpaw, boxwood, caryopteris, American bittersweet, red osier dogwood, Japanese plum-yew, creeping wintergreen, John T. Morris holly, Lydia Morris hollies, leucothoe, European privet, Japanese andromeda, Virginia creeper, blueberry elder, dwarf sweet Christmas box, and rose of Sharon. Check with your local garden center or tree care company for a list of trees and shrubs in your area that are the least appealing to deer.

What can you do?

The best advice is to hire a tree care professional with the experience, expertise and equipment to safely take down or prune damaged trees. Require proof of liability insurance and check to see if the cost of the work is covered by your insurance company. Contact the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), a 71-year-old public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture. It has more than 2,000 member companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards and who are required to carry liability insurance. TCIA also has the nation’s only Accreditation program that helps consumers find tree care companies that have been inspected and accredited based on: adherence to industry standards for quality and safety; maintenance of trained, professional staff; and dedication to ethics and quality in business practices. An easy way to find a tree care service provider in your area is to use the “Locate Your Local TCIA Member Companies” program. You can use this service by calling 1-800-733-2622 or by doing a ZIP code search at www.treecaretips.org

Editors: If you would like additional information or digital photos, please contact editor@tcia.org.