

DEER RESISTANT PLANTS

Deer may become your least favorite backyard visitor when they munch everything from the arborvitae to your prized roses. But you can keep deer from becoming a pest in a number of ways, including a shift in your landscaping regime to some of their least favorite plants.

Mule deer and whitetail deer in eastern Washington are “browsers.” That means they eat “browse,” on the growing tips of shrubs, trees, and other plants. Evidence of browsing is the ragged tips where the twigs have been broken. (Rodents and rabbits leave a clean cut when they browse.)

In late winter and early spring most deer use grass, clover, and other forbs and legumes in their diet. In fact, during February and March when snowcover usually fades, temperatures rise, and sunlight hours noticeably increase, deer are out in droves on almost anything edible. That’s because they’re trying to regain calories lost during winter when it usually costs them more in body energy to look for food than what they gain from it.

Plant use by deer varies by the number of deer in the area, the availability of alternative food sources, winter weather conditions, and plant preferences. From area to area, deer also have different tastes. Young plants may be eaten and older plants of the same species left alone, especially in early spring when deer are trying succulent new growth of plants they otherwise would not eat.

One option for coexisting with deer is to plant or replace damaged plants with more “deer-resistant” (or close to it!) plants. These are species that tend to be (but not always!) a deer’s least favorites. The following list includes “best bets” for keeping deer disinterested. It should be considered a guide rather than the final word.

Annuals:

- Ageratum
- baby’s breath
- bachelor buttons
- calendula
- California poppy
- Cosmos
- Chinese forget-me-not
- Dusty miller
- Four o’clock
- Marigolds
- Salvia
- Snapdragon
- Snow-on-the-mountain
- Sunflower
- Sweet alyssum
- Zinnia

Deciduous Shrubs:

- Barberry
- Butterfly bush
- Cotoneaster
- Daphne
- Elderberry
- Golden currant
- Hazelnut (Filbert)
- Kerria
- Lilac
- Potentilla
- Red-flowered currant
- Red-twig dogwood
- Snowberry
- Spirea
- Wild rose

Evergreen Shrubs:

- Boxwood
- Evergreen barberry
- Holly
- Juniper
- Mugho pine
- Oregon grape
- Rabbitbrush
- Sagebrush

Herbs and Vegetables:

- Chives
- Cucumbers
- Lavender
- Marjoram
- Mints
- Oregano
- Potatoes
- Rosemary
- Sage
- Thyme
- Tomatoes

Perennials:

- Black-eyed Susan
- Blanket flower
- Bleeding-heart
- Bluebells
- Butterfly weed
- Columbine

- Coral bells
- Coreopsis
- Creeping phlox
- Daisy
- Daylilies
- Delphinium
- English ivy
- Ferns
- Flax
- Foxgloves
- Gay feather
- Hellebore
- Iris
- Larkspur
- Lavender
- Lupine
- Peony
- Poppy
- Sage
- Seathrift

- Snow in-summer
- Wall-flower
- Yarrow
- Yucca

Trees (these must be protected from deer when young):

- Birch
- Chokecherry
- Douglas fir
- Fir
- Maple
- Oak
- Pine
- Spruce
- Sumac
- Willow

If you'd rather keep the plants you already have, (or if you can attest to "your" deer's use of the above plants!), there are other ways to discourage deer.

Fencing is still the only consistently effective tool for reducing deer damage. Deer can be kept out of areas with eight-foot high net-type wire fencing that is properly installed. Chicken wire will work as long as posts are not more than 12 feet apart and the wire is stretched tight and anchored to the ground so deer don't crawl under. Believe it! Deer will crawl. Board fences and solid hedges need only be 5 ½ feet high; deer won't jump over objects when they can't see what's on the other side.

Individual trees and shrubs can be protected with **exclusion devices** such as cylinders of welded-wire mesh placed around them. This will also prevent bucks from rubbing their antlers on trees – breaking branches or girdling trunks. New seedlings and very young trees can be protected with plastic mesh tubes or netting. Fine mesh chicken wire laid out on the ground around plants can also dissuade deer because they don't like to get their feet in the wire.

Many garden shops carry **commercial deer repellents**, most made from a base of blood or bone meal. You may order a copy of [Comparison of Commercial Deer Repellents](#) from USDA Forest Service, MTDC Bldg.1, Fort Missoula, Missoula, MT 59804-7294. Home remedies include hanging bars of deodorant soap or mesh bags of human hair, or spraying plants with a mixture of raw eggs and water. All have varying degrees of success and usually have to be reapplied after rain.

Various **scare tactics** can move deer out of an area, although sometimes only temporarily, depending on how established their eating habits have become. Try connecting bright lights, radios, or water sprinklers to motion detectors.

Remember that the most deer-proof property may be one that combines sensible plantings with fencing and repellents.

Adapted from Washington Department Fish and Wildlife and Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Program.

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