

Landscaping with Deer

by James P. Engel, White Oak Nursery, www.whiteoaknursery.biz

© 2003

The following list of deer resistant plants is compiled from several university resources as well as my personal experience of deer feeding. This list is not intended to be complete and any blanks indicate that there is no data for that species. One can only use this list as a general guide to make plant selections. In many cases plants have been placed in more than one preference category which reflects the difficulty of determining the actual preferences of deer.

There is no such thing as a deer proof plant. The term resistant is used to convey the frequency with which deer are found to feed on any particular plant species. Please note that deer-browsing resistance of a plant species changes according to fluctuations in deer populations, alternative food availability, time of year, environmental factors and even individual animal preference. No plant is safe under all conditions. You must determine for yourself the amount of deer pressure your plantings may face based on deer population, alternative food supplies in winter and summer, travel patterns and preventative measures such as the use of deterrents, dogs and fencing.

Use my table of 185 plants (76k PDF file) to select those that are unlikely to be damaged by deer and to identify those plants that frequently require protection. Four categories are included: *Rarely Damaged*, *Seldom damaged*, *Occasionally damaged* and *Frequently Damaged*. These four categories will help you determine the risk of damage you might expect and the preventative strategies you can undertake to reduce this damage.

Methods to reduce damage

There are many ways to reduce or deter deer damage. One of these is choosing plants that are low on the list of preferred species. Paw Paw, Spice bush, Sweet shrub are three such species that are widely reported to be deer resistant due to their aromatic foliage. These plants also provide valuable wildlife benefits. Some shrubs such as Beaked hazelnut, Nannyberry and Grey dogwood are vigorous growers that can withstand a certain level of browsing once they are firmly established. These plants continue to sprout from the root system and can replace damaged and browsed branches.

I would recommend against planting some of the non-native species that are recommended as deer proof plants such as barberry, honeysuckle or privet. The invasive nature of these plants and their questionable ornamental attributes do not justify their use in the landscape.

Trees in general are out of reach of deer browsing once they have surpassed the 6 ft height and after the bark has matured and roughened. Some protection such as a wire cage may be necessary for smaller trees until the tree is sufficiently large enough to resist browsing and bark feeding.

Planting patterns can deter some deer feeding. Deer do not like to cross hedges or solid fences where they cannot see what danger waits on the other side. Deer also do not like to force their way through dense shrubs or shrubs with thorns and firm branches. Shrubs planted in a dense hedge or in groupings can deter deer from pushing through or jumping over this barrier. Deer can be directed by hedges and solid fencing to channel them away from yards and plantings. Massing plants in clusters also can deter deer from feeding in the center of the massing. Deer will be restricted to the periphery of the planting restricting feeding to only a portion of the plant. Some damage can be tolerated like natural pruning but most of the plant is out of range and allowed to grow naturally.

Trees and shrubs can be planted together in mixed plantings. This creates natural looking plantings that are easier to protect as a group than large numbers of individual plants in the landscape.

There are many other deer deterrents that can be used such as repellants, alarms and coverings. These products are outside the scope of this article.

To summarize, plant native species when ever possible, their ecological benefits far exceed any other choices. Choose species that have a level of resistance that you can live with. Plant more trees or larger shrubs if deer pressure is high. Plant close together in groupings and mixed plantings to restrict access. Protect new plantings with fencing or other deterrents when plantings are young and vulnerable.