

Reduce Deer Damage in Your Yard

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Deer grazing outside your window can be a welcome sight, unless the deer are eating your favorite flowers. Their spring and summer browsing can kill or severely damage young garden and landscape plants. Once deer are attracted to your yard, discouraging them is not easy. But, there are ways you can reduce damage to your plants while still enjoying the deer's presence.

Kinds of deer in Oregon

There are four kinds of deer found throughout the Pacific Northwest. The most common kind or **species** is the mule deer. There are two subspecies of mule deer: those found on the east side of the Cascade Mountains, and the Columbian black-tailed deer that generally are found west of the Cascade Mountains.

Columbian white-tailed deer are found along the Columbia River in northwest Oregon, in southwest Oregon near Roseburg, and in southwest Washington. They are listed as endangered.

Even less common is the Idaho white-tailed deer found in northeast Oregon and Idaho.



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Elements of deer habitat

Deer require plenty of food and water. They are an “**edge**” species, which means that they prefer to feed (or **browse**) in open areas near cover, usually forests or dense shrubs. Open areas created by humans, such as clear-cuts, cropland, parks, and urban yards and gardens, provide lots of edges for deer to feed in.

Food

Deer eat an average of 7 pounds of food per day. They prefer to eat a variety of foods and move around nibbling on different plants. They eat over 500 kinds of plants.

Deer have favorite foods, and they search for them even when other foods are abundant. They like lush green gardens with tender new shoots of grasses and plants. Some of their favorite foods are buds of many kinds of trees, vegetables, vines, shrubs, herbs, and grass.

In the spring, deer favor leafy plants and agricultural crops such as wheat, alfalfa, clover, and peas. In late summer, they add fruit to their diet along with peas, beans, and corn. Damage to ornamental plants often is most severe during spring and summer. Acorns are an important food for deer in the fall and winter. In winter, deer eat almost anything, including lichen, dead leaves, twigs, bark, and evergreen boughs.

The habits of deer revolve around sources of food, and they often are seen in the same places again and again. If deer find good things to eat in your yard, you can expect that they will be back.

Water

Deer drink 2 to 4 quarts of water a day. They might drink from a birdbath, pond, or fountain in your yard.

Shelter

Deer are most active during the hours of early morning and evening, and they bed in sheltered areas most of the day. Common places for deer to find shelter are old-growth forests, low overhanging trees, dense shrubs, and tall-grass meadows. Deer are **ruminants**, which means they need to chew their cud to digest their food. They fill up on food quickly, and then find a safe, sheltered spot to regurgitate and chew their cud. Shelter also protects deer from weather and predators, and gives them a place to rest and raise their young.

Strategies to reduce damage

Tolerate deer in your yard

Tolerating deer and learning to coexist are easier than trying to keep deer off your property entirely. Larger, established plants usually are able to recover from mild browsing. Winter browsing by deer usually is not so harmful, because many plants are dormant and can recover in the spring. Deer move from place to place according to the season, so you might not see them in your yard year round.

Put in deer-resistant plants

Design your landscape to be unattractive to deer by putting in deer-resistant plants (see EC 1440, *Deer-resistant Ornamental Plants*). Test plants before planting by setting them out for a few days to see if deer ignore them. Plants that might deter deer have a strong scent, thick or leathery leaves, or fuzzy, bristly, or spiny textures.

It can be hard to find plants deer don't like. Some deer eat plants that other deer ignore. Preferences also vary by season and region.

Allow your dog to guard

A dog can be an effective deterrent to deer. But, a dog on a chain is no threat. To be effective, the dog must be able to run loose within a fenced yard. You might try the no-fence dog fence. This is an invisible fence made by burying a thin cable around the perimeter of your yard. Your dog wears a radio collar that transmits a signal to warn him if he goes near the line. If he gets too close, he gets a mild shock. Dogs quickly learn the boundaries, but they give chase if the incentive is strong enough.

Invisible fences do not work with all dogs, and they might not be right for some places. Consult a knowledgeable supplier or dog trainer before you install an invisible fence for your dog.

Fencing

Perimeter fencing

The most effective deterrent to deer is to fence them out of a garden or yard. You'll need to surround the entire area and leave no holes or openings. Perimeter fencing can be made of plastic mesh, wood, chain link, or wire. Trees can be used as natural posts. Tall, dense hedges and shrubs might look nicer than plastic or metal fencing, but they are less effective.

If you are planting a new garden and want to protect it, put the fence up first. It is easier to prevent deer damage than to correct it.

Nondurable fences

Many gardeners have found that black plastic mesh works very well around gardens. It is easy to use, and you can buy it at most home and garden stores or order it on the Internet (do a search for "deer fencing"). The mesh is less noticeable than other types of

fencing, and, if it is supported properly with metal or wooden stakes, it is effective at keeping deer out.

The mesh should be at least 8 feet high. Since the mesh is not easy to see, hang strips of white cloth about 4 feet high for every 12 feet of fence so that deer can see it. You can remove the strips after a month or two, because the deer will have learned to take an alternate route.

Plastic mesh is not as durable as metal or wood. It might last only 10 to 15 years. But, it is much less expensive, and it is easy to work with.

Durable fences

There are different styles of durable fences that work well to keep deer out. A standard deer fence (Figure 1) should have a minimum height of 8 feet. Deer usually won't jump when they can't see the other side, so, if the fence is solid, then a 5-foot fence is high enough (Figure 2).

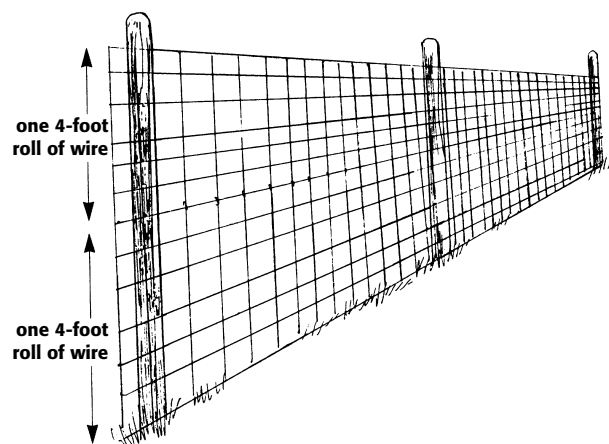


Figure 1. A vertical deer fence should be at least 8 feet high.

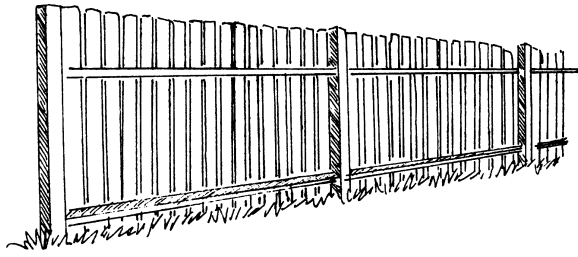


Figure 2. A solid wooden fence can be both attractive and deer-proof.

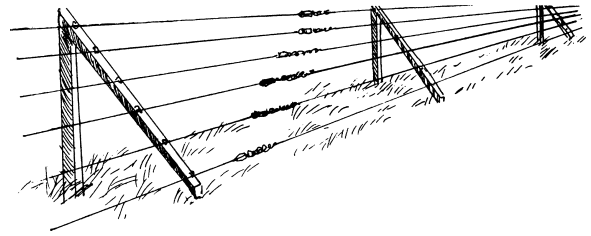


Figure 3. A slanted deer fence uses a combination of height and width to defeat deer.

Deer are not able to jump high and wide at the same time, so a slanted fence also is effective (Figure 3). A slanted fence should be 4 feet high with the angled part at 45 degrees. This style fence uses up more space than other types.

Another deerproof fence is the double row fence (Figure 4). It should be 4 to 5 feet tall with the fences 4 to 5 feet apart. You can use the space between the fences for planting.

Electric fences also are effective against deer and can be less expensive than other types of durable fences. However, electric fences require more maintenance and can short out easily if vegetation near the fence grows too high.

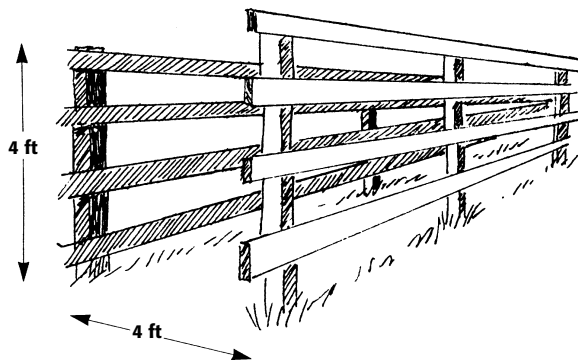


Figure 4. A double-row fence consists of side-by-side vertical fences.

Individual fencing

Curious browsing by deer can kill young plants, so you might need to protect certain plants until they become established. Fencing or netting around individual trees or shrubs deters deer from eating them.

Black plastic mesh works well for protecting individual plants and is easy to install. Support the mesh with stakes or poles. Be sure it is well spaced from the plant, because deer prefer to eat the buds and new leaf shoots (Figure 5).

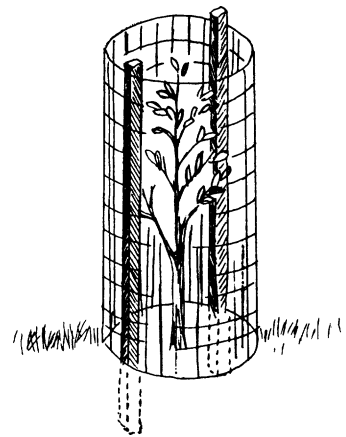


Figure 5. Nylon or wire mesh can protect vulnerable plants effectively.

Buck rubs

During the fall, you might notice that the bark is stripped off of small trees. In deer country, this is probably because male deer (**bucks**) are rubbing their antlers aggressively to remove the velvet covering (Figure 6). These trees are called **buck rubs**. The deer return to use the same trees every year.

To protect small trees, use a protective trunk wrap. The ones you buy at garden centers usually are made of Vexar[®] tubes. Or, you can use strips of old inner tube or plastic mesh (Figure 7).

Repellants

Deer have an acute sense of smell, which they use to locate food. Certain scents can deter deer effectively, if they are used properly. They are called **deer repellants**. Deer repellants must be reapplied often, because rain dilutes their strength and the scent wears off.

You can choose from several commercial products available from garden stores or nurseries.

You also can create your own home remedies. You must be careful not to use any substance that could poison or harm any wildlife or plant species. Some common home remedies include deodorant soap, pepper spray, human hair, and low-wattage flashing lights hung around the property.

You can use soap in two different ways. One is to hang deodorant bar soap from trees or place it on stakes around the perimeter of your garden. The other way is to spray all the plants with a mixture of 1 part deodorant soap and 50 parts water.

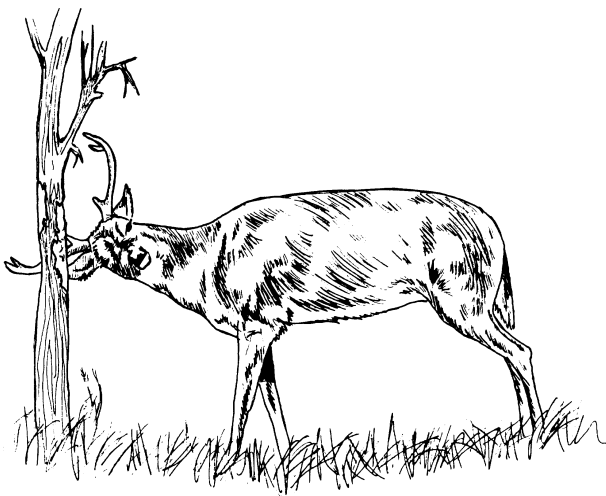


Figure 6. By late summer, bucks have begun rubbing off the velvet from their antlers.

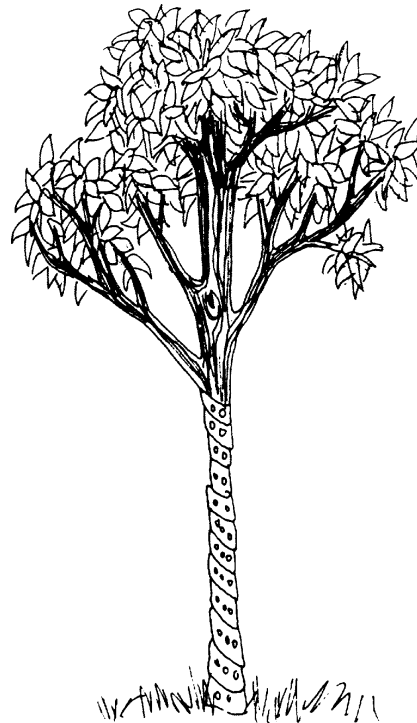


Figure 7. Protective trunk wrap can prevent damage caused by bucks rubbing their antlers.

Homemade pepper spray also can be effective. Mix 4 to 5 tablespoons cayenne pepper or 2 tablespoons hot pepper or Tabasco with 1 gallon water. Add 1 tablespoon vegetable oil. Mix well and spray directly on plants where needed. Reapply often, especially after rain.

You can hang balls of human hair from trees or place them on stakes surrounding the area you want to protect.

Flashing lights, such as a string of Christmas lights, cast shadows that frighten deer. But, deer quickly learn that the lights are not harmful and ignore them.

Coexisting with deer

1. Do not try to feed deer. Feeding wildlife can have detrimental effects both to the wildlife and your property.
2. Change your deterrent tactics throughout the year so deer do not become accustomed to them.
3. Deer moving across roads can be a danger. Collisions hurt people and kill many deer every year. Drive more carefully during twilight hours. If one deer crosses the road in front of you, be prepared for more. Deer often travel in pairs or small groups.
4. Bucks in rut can be dangerous to pets, livestock, and humans. As a general rule, never approach deer, and especially be wary of bucks during the fall rutting season.
5. If your problems with deer persist, contact the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for other possible solutions.

For more information

OSU Extension publications

Deer-resistant Ornamental Plants, EC 1440 (1994). 75¢

See these other publications in The Wildlife Garden set:

Attract Hummingbirds to Your Garden, EC 1541 (2002). \$1.50

Attract Reptiles and Amphibians to Your Yard, EC 1542 (reprinted July 2002). \$2.00

Create a Garden Pond for Wildlife, EC 1548 (reprinted April 2002). \$1.50

Create a Butterfly Garden, EC 1549 (2002). \$1.50

Feed Wild Birds, EC 1554 (2002). \$1.50

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Other publications

Fargione, M.J., P.D. Curtis, and M.E. Richmond. 1991. *Resistance of Woody Ornamental Plants to Deer Damage*, Fact Sheet 800. Cornell Cooperative Extension, Ithaca, New York.

Hart, R.M. 1997. *Deer Proofing Your Yard and Garden*. Storey Books, Pownal, Vermont.

Link, Russell. *Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest*. 1999. University of Washington Press, Seattle & London, in association with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Web sites

Extension & Experiment Station Communications, Oregon State University: eesc.oregonstate.edu

The Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management, University of Nebraska-Lincoln: <http://wildlifedamage.unl.edu/>

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