



# Uninvited Guests

The beauty and challenges of deer in the garden

Story by Marilyn Cox

**D**id you know that one deer can eat up to 12 pounds of vegetation a day? If you garden where deer live, you know that is a lot of lilies, azaleas and impatiens! According to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, deer damage totals more than \$2 billion annually nationwide. This includes \$250 million in landscape plantings, \$100 million in agricultural crop damage and \$750 million in damage to the timber industry.

Interestingly, there was a time when white-tailed deer were on the verge of extinction. Extensive hunting into the early 1900s significantly reduced the national deer population in the U.S. to about 500,000. Concerted efforts were made to control their demise, and they were so successful that now over 34

million deer live in the U.S. and span all 48 contiguous states. In North Carolina alone you can find about 1.25 million and they are found in every county. The deer population in South Carolina is estimated to be upwards of 750,000, and as in North Carolina, they are found in every county in the state.

The deer population and the resulting damage to our landscaping seems to always be increasing. Without intervention, the deer population could potentially double in size every two to three years. Fewer natural predators and the adaptability of deer are two reasons deer are so abundant, even to the point where they have been seen in downtown Chapel Hill in the middle of the day. Controlled culling of herds and hunting seems to be a necessity for some balance.

Deer have learned to adapt to habitats from pine forests to farmland; from river bottoms to oak ridges, and, as many of us know, they also have adapted too well to suburban sprawl. The well-nourished plants of suburban landscapes provide a nutritional food source for deer all year round.

Much to our aggravation, our well-tended plants help sustain the deer through the winter, when other food sources may be scarce. The natural scarcity of food during the winter in the woodlands and forest, the native habitat of deer, would limit the number of deer that would survive over the winter. The birth rate and number of fawns born in any one year is directly related to how well a doe has eaten in the spring. Our gardens are providing



←↔ Damage done by deer is unmistakable. The bark above is gone in places from deer rubbing up against it, and the sight to the left is a familiar one to gardeners, as many prized plants get a good start on growing and then get nibbled partly to the ground.

Photo courtesy of Marilyn Cox.

↕↕ Below are two plants that deer will sometimes stay away from, *Osmanthus* (top) and Lenten roses (*Helleborus*) (bottom).

Photos courtesy of Marilyn Cox.



a wonderful nutritional boost to deer, inadvertently contributing to the abundance of deer we see every day. But they don't have to.

As gardeners we may feel we are constantly battling deer, and in many ways we are – especially if we refuse to plant only so-called “deer-resistant” plants. Deer-resistant plants are plants that deer tend to avoid, such as plants with aromatic leaves, fuzzy leaves or tough, leathery leaves. Some plants contain poisonous compounds, and they are pretty reliably left alone. However, if it's a matter of starvation, all bets are off and the deer-resistant list goes out the window!

As a gardener and a plant enthusiast, I never wanted my plant selection to be limited over the worry of hungry deer devouring my latest

favorite flower. Over the course of several years, I've worked on combining natural ingredients with botanical oils to develop deer repellents that are effective, environmentally safe, rain-proof and without a foul or unpleasant odor. The botanical oils were carefully chosen from plants and scents that deer avoid, and ones that increase the effectiveness of the other ingredients in the repellent. The final outcome was a line of repellents that protect my most prized flowers and plants.

Spray repellents are very effective at deterring deer when used regularly. Available as ready-to-use or as a concentrate, you simply spray plants favored by deer. The repellent dries clear and is rainproof. For the best adhesion, repellents should be sprayed on dry plants. An alternative to the



## Deer Deterrents

**While nothing is ever 100 percent effective, there are some tried and true ways to deter deer from your garden.**

- Fencing; whether you use wood or wire, a deer fence must be at least 8 feet tall to keep them from jumping in your garden.
- Liquid repellents, such as Deer Defeat, Bobbex, Liquid Fence or I Must Garden.
- Ivory soap; drill a hole in the bar of soap and then tie it to your plant to keep deer away.
- Human hair; stuff clumps of hair in the ground between your plants, or put it in old nylons tied to your plants.

liquid repellent is a granular repellent that can be applied in wet weather. The granular repellent will repel deer, rabbits and even groundhogs from your precious plants.

One of the most important considerations when using repellents is to touch up new growth. A topical repellent will protect what has been sprayed and protect new growth to some degree, but once that new growth exceeds 1 inch in length, it is a good idea to reapply to new growth. I like to hide a bottle of repellent under a plant, or conceal it, hanging from a branch within an evergreen tree so it is always handy for these quick touch-ups. It saves me a trip to the garage and lessens my chances of getting distracted and ultimately forgetting to spray.

It is also important to spray during the winter months. With the beginning of the fall and colder weather we may not be in our gardens quite as much, but the deer are still there. They do not hibernate, but by regularly applying repellents during the winter, you'll be able to enjoy your azaleas come spring. In addition, as plants begin to

emerge, they'll be protected. It's no fun seeing your hostas chomped down just when they were beginning to grow.

I personally like the spray because it's the least obtrusive when it comes to gardening, but there are many other ways to keep deer out. Some people like the method of hanging bags of human or dog hair around your garden. You can also hang up Ivory soap at different points in your landscape, the smell has been found to keep deer away. And of course you can always build a fence. Just be sure to make it at least 8 feet high to keep deer from jumping over.

As long as there are deer where you live, realize that even when you have everything under control and your plants look wonderful, you have to continue to protect them from the devastation of deer. It is a year-long battle, but one worth fighting. ☺

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