

Damage to Plants...Oh Deer!

By Charleen Barr

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Gardening at high altitude is a constant challenge trying to outfox nature and the difficulty she imposes, and adding critter issues requires creativity. Animals are drawn to gardens and yards because they will find food, water and/or shelter. Keep wildlife at bay with habitat modification strategies.

Deer resist eating plants that are strong-scented, and those with thick leathery or fuzzy leaves, or bristly or spiny textures. Alliums are categorized as rarely-damaged. The aromas of sage, dill, fennel, oregano, marjoram, rosemary, thyme and mints are too much for their delicate noses to handle. Lavender is a beautiful and useful addition to the rarely-damaged deer resistant garden.

Solanaceous vegetables, the deadly nightshade group of tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers, carry the badge of rarely-damaged. Artichokes and rhubarb are also rarely damaged.

Exclusion by fencing or netting typically must be 8 feet high to keep deer from jumping over. Secure fencing close to the ground to prevent them from crawling under the fence. Protect individual trees or shrubs by encircling the plants with staked wire or plastic mesh. Some commercially available trunk wraps are designed to protect bark from antler-rubbing.

Aversion from the area may mean devices that create noise, motion or lights. Taste-based repellents can help if they are applied repeatedly and changed frequently. Once deer accommodate to a repellent, it loses its ability to deter them. Flashing lights, for example, work briefly but deer soon learn to ignore them. Read labels for taste-based repellents to verify they are approved for use on food crops.

Organic repellents include: Crushed garlic or onions enclosed in a net bag, or fabric softener sheets, blood meal, or a hot sauce and dish soap mix sprayed on plants to create a bad taste. Hanging a few bars of strong-smelling soaps such as Dial or Irish Spring in an old sock or nylons placed around the garden may work; the suggestion is to hang them every three feet. Human hair gathered in a bag and hung from tree branches could be effective, but would need to be replaced monthly.

Rabbits have a continuous feeding habit. They closely crop the area and concentrate their urine in the same spot. Plants completely disappear overnight, especially when they are young, tender shoots.

Fencing and netting is the most effective method for keeping rabbits out of the garden. Fencing should be at least two feet or higher to prevent rabbits from jumping over, and buried three to six inches so they cannot dig under. Bend the buried portion away from the plants.

Remove habitat that protects them from their predators. Rabbits hide in brush piles, tall grass, low-growing shrubs such as thorny rose bushes, and rock piles. They also love to slip beneath sheds, porches or low decks. Block openings to prevent access to these areas.

Plant selection works well with rabbits. They prefer mild flavors and avoid asparagus, leeks, onions, potatoes, rhubarb, squash and tomato. They dislike basil, mint, salvias, parsley and tarragon as well as geraniums and vincas.

Rodents such as voles, gophers, marmots and ground squirrels are strict vegetarians. Habitat modification is effective by keeping tall grasses mowed, removing any landscaping fabric, storing firewood and building supplies on racks above ground.

Protect valuable plants using hardware wire mesh screening at the bottom of raised beds to prevent burrowing under the vegetable garden with the edges of the mesh pointing up. Mousetraps or rat traps for larger critters placed perpendicular in tunnels will also trap small populations of voles or gophers.

Repellents are either area repellents or taste repellents. Area repellents repel the animal by smell. The chemical is aromatic and fills the air in the general area of the planting. Taste repellents include capsaicin or hot sauce which can be used to protect trees, shrubs and vegetable crops.

Additional information may be found at the CSU Extension website:

www.cmg.colostate.edu/pubs/Wildlife.html

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