

Dealing With Deer in the Garden

By UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener
Kathy Nunes

When I moved here a year and a half ago, I was very excited to put the gardening skills I acquired in the Bay Area to use. That was until I discovered the challenges of gardening in the Sierra foothills. The extreme weather conditions, poor soil and wildlife intrusions soon frustrated me. But living here makes enduring the challenges worthwhile! It helped when I made an attitude adjustment and accepted the fact that the deer were here first, not me! As a new Master Gardener, I have learned quite a bit about defending our gardens from these pertinacious creatures.

Deer eat a wide variety of vegetation, but tend to create more problems during the seasons when food is lacking in their natural habitat, especially during drought. They will eat some plants consistently, some only occasionally and some they will almost never touch. Deer may browse through our yards and nibble on new plantings just to determine if they are palatable. **Here are a few tips** to help you protect the territory you have claimed as your yard:

FENCING

Proper fencing is the most effective method of defense. To be safe, a **7 to 8 foot fence is the best**, although 6 feet is often enough. **The fence itself should be made from materials that even fawns cannot get through.** But many of us have yards that don't make fencing feasible in some areas. In that case, you can use fencing only for the areas where they will almost always feast and where using deterrent sprays is not practical or safe. **Vegetable and fruit gardens (and even large rose plantings) should be fenced.**

INDIVIDUAL PLANT PROTECTORS

You can also **defend some plants from damage individually**, which is more economical. Cages can be made out of poultry wire, heavily woven wire or strong plastic netting. The key is using strong material – don't underestimate the strength or persistence of our deer! These individual protectors should also be tall – at least 5 feet high (7 feet is a safer bet). Surround the plant or tree with strong stakes and form a circle around it, leaving enough room for growth. Some wire protectors can be removed once the plant is tall enough for the foliage to be out of reach.

DEER RESISTANT PLANTS

There are many published lists of deer resistant plants and some of our local nurseries have their own lists. But most don't make the claim that the plants are totally "deer-proof". Some of these lists are just combinations of other lists of deer resistant plants. Always keep in mind that not all of the plants on a deer resistant plant list can grow here. Check the USDA hardiness zone on the label or search the internet if the plant isn't marked. For most of us, the USDA zone is 7.

Some **characteristics** of plants **that do not attract deer** are:

- bitterness
- spiciness
- poisonous (like oleander)
- rough leaves and stems (although they love roses!)

Types of plants that do not attract deer:

- Junipers, cedars, spruce, pines, oaks and redwoods are safe bets
- Many ornamental grasses and ferns
- Shrubs such as manzanita, oleander, spirea, holly, viburnum, cotoneaster, toyon and barberry
- Perennials like lavender, catmint, coreopsis, artemisia, foxglove, gaillardia, peony and Shasta daisy also work well
- Bulbs they seldom touch are iris and daffodils
- Some herbs such as basil, thyme, rosemary and sages (including many salvias)

REPELLENTS

Some chemical repellents work better than others. Many don't last long, especially with rain and overhead irrigation and **must be re-applied** afterward. They deter deer via strong tastes and smells. I learned the hard way to not spray with the wind in my direction! Always follow the manufacturer's directions and **never use them on food crops unless they are registered for that purpose**. Trying to **frighten deer with noise making devices or motion activated lights is ineffective** because they get smart all too quickly and adjust to them. **Traps, poisons and shooting deer in our residential areas are all illegal.**

To wrap it up, there are many ways to make your garden impervious to damage from our sometimes ravenous deer. I have found that I usually have to use a combination of all four recommended solutions. I still get frustrated at times – I even caught them feasting on my plants and lawn as I was writing this! But I also admire their splendor and grace, and accept that they are part of what makes the Sierra Foothills beautiful and exciting!

Kathy Nunes, previously a Bay Area Master Gardener, transferred to the UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener program in 2009. She has gotten into great shape by chasing the deer from her garden and replacing plants they keep ripping up and eating.