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SUMMARY

Selecting plants judiciously, emphasizing foliage rather than flower color, and using temporary barriers can all help Contra Costa gardeners have beautiful gardens despite browsing by deer.

Deer in the Garden

by Carmen Konkle, UC Master Gardener

Deer problems in your garden? Try a little tolerance.

Living in northern California offers many opportunities to interact with wildlife, which for many of us is why we chose to live here in the first place. However, sometimes those interactions are not so pleasant, as in our love/hate relationship with deer. Seeing a lovely doe and her fawn feeding in the meadow elicits a collective “oohh”. But the vision of your roses being ripped off the stems one by one is enough to make you scream and this greatly affects one’s enjoyment of nature. Can you plant for deer resistance? The answer is yes.

Deer-Resistant Plants:

The mention of deer resistant and native plants makes most people think boring and no color. On the contrary, there are many plants both natives and non-natives, in a full color spectrum and hardiness that are not particularly appealing to deer. In learning about planting for deer resistance, one has to do a little homework. Review your planting site for amount of sunlight and water, type of soil, and topography.

With these answers one can make a more educated selection from a very long list of plants ranging from groundcovers to shrubs to flowering specimens. Several published lists of deer-resistant plants are available. One of the most useful can be found in *The Sunset Western Garden Book* (Sunset Publishing Co.). These lists should be used as a general guide. Local nurseries or other gardeners will often have information specific to your area and landscaping or gardening catalogs may designate deer-resistant plants.

Think Foliage Color:

Creating a beautiful and colorful landscape is easy by using trees and shrubs with leaf colors ranging from deep greens such as *Carpenteria californica*, to grays and deep reds such as Barberry (*Berberis* spp.) for color when flowering plants have died back. While many think that shrubs such as *Ceanothus* (C. ‘Dark Star’, C. ‘Julia Phelps’, *C. rigidus* ‘Snowball’) or oleander are too common, they are



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available in many colors and sizes, require little water, and are quite showy in the right location. There are a wide variety of grasses and sedges, flowering groundcovers, vines and bulbs in a plethora of colors to augment your foundation shrubs.

Consider Temporary Barriers:

While many plants are “deer resistant”, during the hot, dry days of August and September, deer are quite hungry and will nibble on just about anything to get nourishment and moisture. Rather than fence in your entire yard, it may be more practical to protect new plants and

small trees with a barrier or fencing around each plant for the short term, until the plant is large enough to withstand a little “pruning” by deer or other wildlife.

The fencing of whole yards relegates our wildlife to busy streets and highways. In the Lamorinda area of Contra Costa County alone, more than 700 deer were killed by automobiles or euthanized in 2009. Before you build a fence, especially for the front yard, consider what you can live with; plant for deer resistance instead and enjoy the natural wildlife of our region.