

Some advice on urban deer-resistant plants

If you are willing to change what plants you grow on your property, then eliminating the food supply for urban deer can significantly reduce your risk of contracting Lyme disease from infected ticks.

The numerical difference between the typical population density of wild deer and the much higher population density of urban deer largely reflects the delicious menu provided by ornamental landscaping.

This leads to the logical, and largely correct, conclusion that native plants, shrubs and trees may be significantly more deer resistant than popular garden cultivars.

Even urban deer tend not to eat native ferns, trilliums, obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*), switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*), solomons seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) and spiderwort (*Tradescantia*) to name just a few.

The presumption is that thousands of years of coexistence have allowed these plants to evolve natural protection from browsing deer by smelling and tasting less than delicious. Native shrubs like

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In the Earth



American beautyberry (*Calli-carpa americana*), witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) and many native trees are all rarely sampled by urban deer.

There are some non-native plants that also enjoy the dining disdain of urban deer, including all varieties of allium, hellebores, brunnera, Russian sage, astilbe, epimedia, bleeding hearts, pulmonaria, herbaceous and tree peonies, weigela and most large non-native ornamental grasses. Daffodils are a good spring bulb not on the menu.

On the other hand, urban deer seem to love to eat hostas, hydrangeas of all sorts, Japanese barberries, flowering crabapples, tulips, crocus, honeysuckle, yew, roses and many varieties of magnolia. Moreover, it is not unusual to find that a plant ignored by your visiting browsers for years may suddenly be on the menu.

Many gardeners try a variety of browsing discouragements less extravagant than fences or changing which plants they grow, but these tend to work only for situations with low deer pressure. Smelly stuff, bitter-tasting stuff, systemic treatments of various kinds tend only to work for a while and then are ignored by deer with the munchies.

Electric flowers and motion-activated lights, noise-makers, ultrasonic sirens and water sprayers are likewise generally only temporarily effective in areas like ours with high deer pressure. Hiding electric flowers among desirable deer forage, for example, quickly leads to isolated electric flowers surrounded by plants eaten to the ground.

A word of caution ... most plant catalogs that label some of their offerings as "deer resistant" are referring to the behavior of wild deer or urban deer under circumstances of low deer pressure. Some plants so labeled are actually resistant to high deer pressure, but most of them may be a disappointment.

I find talking to fellow gardeners about what the deer eat and don't eat on their

property is a more successful way to identify new plants to grow that may be systematically snubbed by your urban deer.

While all of this seems frustrating, there are bright spots. I have friends who cultivated a large bed next to the woods in a subdivision just south of the village of Manlius. They planted a broad mixture of native wildflowers. The results are absolutely spectacular and the deer have ignored them, at least this first year.

Urban deer reduce quality of life for gardeners and represent a serious health and safety problem for everyone because of deer-auto accidents and Lyme disease.

Plant fence posts or native plants in the earth in your garden and pressure elected officials to take the problem of urban deer seriously. Broad action to control deer populations has proven to be the best approach.

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