Preventing Deer Damage

Deer are charming to watch, but they can cause considerable damage to plants. They sometimes wipe out restoration plantings, hinder forest succession and ruin home landscapes. Damage is most commonly noticed in spring on new, succulent growth. You can identify deer damage by the appearance of chewed plants. Deer do not have upper incisors, so browsed twigs and stems show a rough, shredded surface. Deer will strip the bark, leaving no teeth marks. In contrast, damage caused by rabbits has clean, 45-degree cuts and other rodents leave narrow teeth marks.

It is difficult to discourage deer in a specific area. Neighbours who enjoy feeding deer contribute to the overpopulation. Frightening deer with noise, lights, and/or watchdogs typically provides only temporary relief. More practical strategies for preventing deer damage to plants include treating plants with deer repellents, netting and tubing, fencing, and selecting plants deer dislike.

Repellents

There are two general types of deer repellents: contact repellents and area repellents. Contact repellents are applied directly to plants, and make them taste bad. Area repellents are placed in the browsing area, repelling the deer with a foul odor. Repellents are generally more effective on less preferred plants.

A spray of 20 percent eggs and 80 percent water is one of the most effective repellents. Mix the egg and water together before spraying. This repellent must be reapplied in about 30 days. A six percent solution of hot sauce is also effective. Apply repellents on a dry day, when the temperature is above freezing. Completely cover young trees and shrubs. For older trees, treat only the new growth. If possible, spray to a height six feet above the maximum expected snow depth. Deer browse from the top of the plant downwards.

Netting and Tubing

Netting and tubing around individual seedlings are effective methods to reduce deer damage to small plants. You can protect smaller seedlings and larger plants with sections of plastic drain pipes (weeping tiles) or plastic tree guards. Attach netting to a support stake to keep it upright. Another option is to surround the seedlings with dead tree limbs or branches that have many twigs.

Quick Facts

It is difficult to move deer out of areas where they are not wanted.

A hungry deer will find almost any plant palatable, so no plant is "deer proof."

The two types of deer repellents are contact repellents and area repellents.

Netting can reduce deer damage to small trees.

Adequate fencing to exclude deer is the only sure way to control deer damage.

Dead branches like these can protect a group of plants from deer.

Fencing

Adequate fencing is the most effective way to exclude deer. The fence needs to be 2.5 meters high and made of woven wire or polypropylene. Electric fences also can be used.

Selection of Plants

A hungry deer will find almost any plant palatable, so no plant is “deer proof”. For the most part, deer tend to steer clear of plants that have a sticky, rough or hairy surface. Also, plants with fragrant leaves or thorns tend to deter deer from eating them.

Here are some suggested plants for Ontario that deer generally don’t eat:

Trees & Shrubs	Flowers	Vines
common juniper (*Juniperus)*	brown eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*)	Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus)*
dogwood *(Cornus)*	daffodil (*Narcissus)*	
elderberry (*Sambucus)*	blanketflower (*Gaillardia)*	
nannyberry (*Viburnum)*	blazing star (*Liatris)*	
rose *(Rosa)*	lavender (*Lavandula)*	
birch (*Betula)*	pearly everlasting (*Anaphalis)*	
hackberry (*Celtis)*	purple coneflower (*Echinacea)*	
larch (*Larix)*	yarrow (*Achillea)*	
ironwood (*Ostrya)*	anise hyssop (*Agastache)*	
spruce (*Picea)*	columbine (*Aquilegia*)	
oak (*Quercus)*	milkweed (*Asclepias)*	
hemlock (*Tsuga)*	beard tongue (*Penstemon)*	
	vervain (*Verbena)*	