

Coping with Deer

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In addition to eating foliage, stems, blooms and fruit on landscape plants deer cause considerable damage by rubbing their horns on trunks of trees and shrubs. The activity is an effort by bucks to rub the felt off their antlers when they have reached their ultimate size for the year. With the felt rubbed off and the hormones flowing, the bucks will be ready to use their antlers in battles with other bucks in their competition for the attention of does.

Gardeners are most used to bucks rubbing their antlers on young trees. It is not unusual for this action to girdle and kill the tree. If it doesn't kill the young tree, the rubbing will often disrupt the vascular system to permanently reduce the trees growth rate. The damage is common and significant enough that every new tree planted in a neighborhood with deer needs to be protected with a sturdy fence structure to repel the deer for several years until the tree develops corky bark. Crepe myrtles and red oaks seem to be especially vulnerable. For detailed instructions on several options for fence structures to protect newly planted trees from antler-rubbing, visit plantanswers.com.

In addition to trees being damaged by antler rubbing, I have noticed more damage on the stems of large shrubs. Maybe I have just not noticed it in the past or, maybe it is because fewer shade trees were planted or germinated in my neighborhood this year. There was lots of pruning and brush cutting to take advantage of a brush pick-up recently. Access to the Texas mountain laurel and esperanza that were wounded may have been increased by removal of the brush that sheltered their stems. Perhaps pruning out mulberries, Chinaberry, and hackberry followed using "Cut Vine and Stump Killer" has also reduced the usual available trunks? Hackberries however to me do not seem to be a favorite rubbing target. Is that your experience as well?

The rubbing will break down the shrub stems and leave an initial mess but with some pruning to remove the damaged stems, the shrubs should quickly repair themselves depending on the species, fast for esperanza and slower for Texas mountain laurel.

On another important landscaping topic, Plantanswers.com also offers a list of plants that are usually not eaten by deer. Among the plants that are not eaten in my neighborhood are iris, milkweed, four-o'clock, pride of Barbados, thyrallis, firebush, esperanza, Texas mountain laurel, pomegranate, cactus, yuccas, lantana, Mexican honeysuckle, lantana, salvia, standard pittosporum, viburnum, oleander, Carolina jasmine, primrose jasmine, butterfly vine and vinca.

When you compare the list of deer-proof plants for my neighborhood and the list on plantanswers.com; or the list in your own neighborhood, you will note that the deer have different food preferences depending on where they roam. You often must adjust the list for your neighborhood depending on the tastes of the resident deer. It is even worst if you are blessed with a resident population of exotic deer such as in Fair Oaks Ranch in addition to native white-tailed deer.

In addition to the different preferences, deer in some neighborhoods have a habit of tasting and/or pulling up any newly placed plant, whether it is on the deer-proof list or not. To address the curiosity (maybe orneriness) of your deer, a good strategy is to spray a deer repellent on new plantings. In my

experience in the Medical Center neighborhood, Liquid Fence sprayed every week for 3 weeks has been enough to thwart the curiosity of the resident deer. I believe Forrest Appleton, a lead contributor to plantanswers.com, who lives in Hollywood Park, recommends a 3-month Liquid Fence initial planting spray for the ornery deer in his neighborhood!