

Gardening with Deer

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Deer are a major issue in many neighborhoods in the area. These hungry and adaptable mammals are especially significant for determining what we can grow in our landscapes. To have an attractive landscape in a neighborhood with deer consider these facts.

Deer are not grazers; they instead are browsers consuming forbs (small, broadleaf plants) and foliage and stems. One of the favorite deer forbs in San Antonio seems to be horse herb. Although deer cannot survive on grass or hay alone, they do consume some grass. During a drought, deer in some neighborhoods may rely on irrigated St. Augustine grass for moisture.

Feeding deer corn will not reduce consumption of landscape plants. In the short term, corn may replace calories that would normally be provided by landscape plants. In the long term however, corn feeding will contribute to population increase and the increased deer herd will consume more landscape plants. Corn does not provide protein and other essential nutrients that are available in the plants they are eating.

Deer browsing is not the only threat that deer offer to area landscapes. Browsing may be the most damaging activity but the rubbing of the deer antlers can girdle or breakdown shrubs and young trees. If the rubbing breaks through the smooth thin bark on young trees, the damage can be permanent. The tree will never achieve its growth rate potential.

The statement that all deer have the same favorite plants and plants that they will not eat is false. The deer in various neighborhoods have learned to eat different plants, depending on what is available and the influence of drought.

Here are a few deer-proof plants to consider for your landscape.

Deer will eat most shade trees if the trees are short enough for the deer to reach. To protect them, put a sturdy 5-foot tall, 6-foot in diameter fence around the newly planted tree. The fence will protect the foliage and stems from feeding and also protect the bucks from rubbing their antlers on the trunk.

Among the medium-sized trees and large shrubs that deer usually pass up are Mexican plum, huisache, pomegranate, Texas mountain laurel, Viburnum tinus and standard yaupon. Pomegranate should probably have an asterisk because it appears that deer do not eat the foliage but consume blooms and fruit that they can reach in some neighborhoods.

For medium-sized shrubs, consider esperanza, eleagnus, boxwood, cenizo, viburnum sandankwa, thyrallis, sotol, yucca, primrose jasmine, Mexican honeysuckle, poinciana, and Carolina jessamine.

Pittosporum is on the list in some neighborhoods but apparently deer eat it in other neighborhoods.

Among the smaller shrubs that deer do not seem to eat are Salvia greggii, dwarf yaupon, dwarf Chinese holly and cotoneaster.

For perennials and annuals, most deer-proof lists include paperwhites, daffodils, vinca, lantanas, the summer salvias, santolina, four o'clock, and sedums. Sometimes they leave zinnias and snapdragons alone.

In addition to being hungry, deer are curious. They will check out any new planting that you place in the landscape. Their investigation will usually include some taste tests and pulling plants out of the ground.

To reduce the likelihood of this damage, apply the product Liquid Fence to the new plants once per week for at least three weeks. The smell is horrendous to us and evidently to the deer as well.

I have tried many of the other deer repellents including coyote urine, human hair and hot pepper sauce. The pepper sauce was effective but the other repellants did not seem to repel the deer.

The most effective way to keep deer from eating your landscape is to fence it. In most cases, a 6-foot fence will do the job.