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# KEEPING DEER AT BAY

BY DAVID PAYNE



DEER-PROOFING YOUR YARD IS TRICKY, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE.

Foraging deer have become a challenge for many gardeners in our area, and some neighborhoods take the brunt of the invasion. Although these animals are beautiful and interesting to watch, they often feed on the annuals and perennials that we plant to enhance the landscapes around our homes. Since we must share space with them, we need to get smart about what we plant and avoid placing deer candy like pansies, daylilies, hostas, hydrangeas, and azaleas in unprotected areas.

One of the best ways to deer-proof your yard is to choose plants to which deer are not readily drawn. Selective planting limits our choices, especially when we move to shady areas of the yard, but it's an effective way to steer deer in another feeding direction. Knowing that deer like to eat rhododendron and hosta, it's best not to plant them in open locations, including spots on the border of the yard, where deer have the freedom to move and graze at night, out of reach of humans and startling motion lights, and can easily devour an entire plant bed in an evening.

Another way to mitigate foraging deer is to layer planting beds. Vulnerable plants belong





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in the back of the bed, layered in front with annuals and perennials that aren't as attractive to eat, like the stiff-leaved Emily Bruner Holly. You may have a bite here and there, but most plants can recover well from a nibble that doesn't turn into an all-out buffet dinner. By creating areas where deer feel hemmed-in on three sides, we can discourage them from hanging around long enough to taste what they normally might eat.

We should also be cognizant of the “bite line,” and plant trees and perennials that are a more mature size. Unlike animals such as goats, deer do not climb the trunks of mature trees to reach the lower leaves. This means that planting eight-foot, and not three-foot, crape myrtles can outsmart the competition and keep healthy color in the yard. Similarly, caging smaller trees may help prevent male deer from damaging behaviors during the rut cycle, such as rubbing their horns on tree trunks, removing bark, and destroying small lower limbs.

There are plants such as boxwood and butterfly bush that are not an attractive source of food for deer, but you cannot rely on plant tags to know what is truly deer resistant. Deer palettes evolve all the time, and plants that were ignored in the past may now be tasted and even devoured, especially if no other food options are available. The bottom line is that mature, dense landscapes survive deer better, and the best way to get your landscape into a mature state is to work with a competent landscape architect specific to your geographic area who understands the current situation. ◆