

GARDENING IN DEER COUNTRY

Without too much frustration!

KNOW YOUR DEER

Deer are browsers, not grazers. They are ruminants with 4 stomachs, special enzymes in their saliva, and mutualistic bacteria in their digestive systems that allow them to fulfill many of their nutritional needs by eating plants and mast high in tannic acids, such as native oaks and acorns. Deer live in small family groups, usually comprised of does with their female offspring, and live their lives within sometimes small natal territories. There are, indeed, “neighborhood deer” and sometimes these deer have developed specialized tastes in the browse they prefer!

DEER FOOD

Oak trees are a major food source for the deer, providing up to 40% of all their needs from leaves and twigs in summer and, in the early fall when the acorns start to drop, about 50% of their food intake. When deer look like they are grazing in a meadow, they are actually eating broad-leaved plants that grow in amongst grasses, and sometimes also the tip growth of new grasses. Deer cannot digest the cellulose in mature grass; they nibble on new grass shoots and only occasionally. Their diet consists of shoots and young leaves, soft twigs, flowers, fruits and seed capsules, fungus, lichens and mistletoes.

Key Points to Remember:

- Gardens that mimic nature (dry in summer) are not as enticing to the deer; they find your well-watered flower beds very tasty compared to what is available in the dry meadows and chaparral.
- Add new plants to your garden only during the rainy season when there's plenty of other greens for the deer to browse. This allows your new plants to establish in the best of conditions and without a lot of interference.
- Some native plants have developed characteristics, or growth habits, that protect them from deer browsing. These include being poisonous, being thorny or spiny, having aromatic leaves, having silvery dry foliage, having rough or hairy leaves, and having sticky foliage. Choose these first and/or mix them in with the more tempting plants that you want to protect.
- Many plants will withstand some deer browsing once they are established, especially native trees and shrubs. Protect them for the first few years until they get large enough. Plants such as Silk Tassel Bush, Cream Bush, Sticky Monkeyflower, and California Bee Plant are only of seasonal interest to the deer because of the new leafy growth.
- Ceanothus species. Ceanothus is a very important browse plant for the deer; the new spring growth is about 14% protein and also abundant in calcium, providing exactly the nutrients necessary to grow new antlers each year. The easiest to establish in deer country are the species with very small or leathery leaves, and those with spiny edges. Varieties that grow low to the ground are also often of less interest to the deer.

COMPLETELY DEER PROOF

Aromatic plants: Most native Salvias, esp Hummingbird Sage, and most Mint family plants such as Coyote Mint, Yerba Buena and Hedge Nettle

Poisonous plants: Milkweeds, Buttercups, California Pipevine, native Solanums, Sacred Datura, Spice Bush

NO PROTECTION NEEDED

Bunch grasses: Calamagrostis, Festuca, Muhlenbergia, Melica, Nassella (Stipa) spp., Sedges, Carex spp., Rushes, Juncus spp.

Shrubs: Coyote Brush, Barberries, California Sage (Artemesia), Pitcher Sages (Lepechinia spp.), Coyote Mint, Skunk Bush, Desert Willow, California Honeysuckle, California Rose, Bladderpod

Perennials: Gum Plant, Skullcap, native Thistles, Blue-eyed Grass, Yellow-eyed Grass, Yerba Buena, Lilac Verbena, Matilija Poppy, Goldenrod, many of the California Fuchsias

Wildflowers: Globe Gilia, Blue Flax, Tarweeds, Milkmaids, some Clarkias, and most Phacelias

Deer-proof in most gardens: Douglas Iris and Pacific Coast hybrids, Ground Iris, Goldenrod, Yarrow, Seaside Daisy, Coast Aster, Aloes, Agaves and Yuccas, and Bear Grass

PROTECT TO ESTABLISH

These plants can withstand browsing once the plant is established and has enough mass

Shrubs: California Bush Anemone, Lemonade Berry, Sugar Bush, Coffeeberry, Cream Bush, Currants, Gooseberries, Mountain Mahogany, Silk Tassel Bush, Redbud, Quail Bush, Toyon, Elderberry, Snowberry

Buckwheat: Shrubby Buckwheat, St. Catherine's Lace, Small-leaved Buckwheat

Manzanitas and Ceanothus

Perennials: Penstemons, California Fuchsia, sunflowers

All trees: *Also protect the trunks from damage during the rut.* Holly-leaf and Catalina Cherry, Pines, California Bay, Redwoods

WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR PLANTS

1. Cage your plants when you first plant them out; most shrubs need a wire cage about 4 ft. high
2. 4" plants should be covered with a lower cage that also has a top to it
3. Use an egg meal spray on the plants to deter nibbling, easily made from egg meal powder, a little vegetable oil and water. This has to be renewed each time water washes it off.
4. Use human hair clippings around new plants
5. Sprinkle bloodmeal around new plants
6. Create invisible hazards by stringing heavy-duty fishing line within your planted borders
7. Mature shrubs growing close together and mingling into each other, especially on a slope, create their own deer barriers
8. Very aromatic plants can be planted in and around other more desirable species

Compiled by Charlotte Torgovitsky, Fall 2016

More information at www.homegroundhabitats.org