

Marin Chapter California Native Plant Society

Gardening in the Company of Deer

Gardening with native plants in the company of deer can be frustrating but is not impossible. The browsing habits of deer can be difficult to predict, varying by neighborhood, season, and even from year to year. Many people think that they will have an easier time with natives. However, deer relied on these plants before we introduced them to other imported palatable options. Native plants have an advantage in that they have coexisted with deer for millenia and have had time to develop some attributes that discourage browsing. Ultimately, trial and error will teach you what deer in your area will eat or avoid.

Some strategies:

Fencing. A fence can work—but only if it's at least 7 feet tall. Deer can easily jump over anything shorter. Fencing wire must also be well secured at the bottom, as deer can squeeze through surprisingly narrow spaces. Consider caging individual trees and shrubs to give them a better chance during establishment.

Tree Guards. If you are trying to establish new trees or shrubs, esp. in an open space, tree trunks should be protected from antlers; bucks can shred woody plants during the fall rut when they use them to rub velvet off their antlers, sometimes girdling and killing young trees. Wire mesh installed with metal stakes, or heavy-duty plastic mesh tree guards will work.

Repellents. Vulnerable young plants or tender new growth can be sprayed with repellent, such as Deer Out, Liquid Fence or Bobbex but to be effective this procedure must be performed routinely; it also needs to be reapplied after rains.

Minimize Irrigation. A summer dry garden isn't nearly as enticing to your neighborhood deer as a lush, well-watered bed with lots of hydrated foliage.

Plant in the Rainy Season. In winter, there are lots of other green plants for the deer to eat. They are much less likely to go for that nursery-grown treat you just planted.

Use Unpalatable Plants to Shield Tasty Ones. Placing more tempting plants that you want to protect at the back of the border or surrounding them with more deer-resistant species may help but isn't foolproof.

Plant an Oak Tree. Acorns are a go-to food source for deer, esp. those from white oaks. Acorns contain a nice mix of healthy carbs, proteins, and fats, and supply as much as 40% of their diet as deer fatten up for winter. If acorns are plentiful, deer will be less inclined to feast on your yard's landscaping.

Choose Deer-Resistant Plants. Among the traits deer tend to avoid are plants with aromatic leaves; prickly or thorny foliage; fuzzy leaves, silvery leaves, dry foliage; poisonous foliage or flowers; rough or hairy leaves; and sticky foliage. Some suggested deer-resistant plants to try:

Trees

Pinus contorta var. *contorta* / shore pine

Pseudotsuga menziesii / Douglas fir

Sequoia sempervirens / coast redwood

Shrubs

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi / bearberry
Artemisia californica / coast sagebrush
Baccharis pilularis / coyote brush
Berberis (Mahonia) species / barberry, Oregon grape
Carpenteria californica / bush anemone
Ceanothus / deer will eat many ceanothus species but some are a bit more resistant, notably
C. gloriosus, *C. maritimus*, and cultivars 'Dark Star' and 'Julia Phelps'.
Frangula californica / coffeeberry
Diplacus aurantiacus and cultivars / sticky monkeyflower
Garrya elliptica / coast silktassel
Holodiscus discolor / creambush, oceanspray
Lepechinia species / pitcher sage
Lupinus albifrons, arboreus, propinquus / bush lupines
Morella (Myrica) californica / Pacific wax myrtle
Oemleria cerasiformis / oso berry
Salvia species / sages
Vaccinium ovatum / evergreen huckleberry

Perennials

Anaphalis margaritacea / pearly everlasting
Artemisia douglasiana / mugwort
Asclepias species / milkweeds
Cirsium occidentale / cobweb thistle
Clinopodium douglasii / yerba buena
Epilobium canum species / CA fuchsia
Grindelia species / gumplants
Heterotheca villosa / hairy goldenaster
Iris douglasiana, macrosiphon / Douglas & ground iris
Lessingia filaginifolia / creeping sand aster
Linum lewisii / blue flax
Maianthemum racemosum, stellatum / fat & slim false Solomon's seal
Monardella villosa / coyote mint
Petasites frigida / western coltsfoot
Phacelia bolanderi, californica / Bolander's & California phacelia
Ranunculus californicus, occidentalis / California & western buttercup
Salvia spathacea / hummingbird sage
Sisyrinchium bellum / blue-eyed grass
Solanum umbelliferum / Blue Witch nightshade
Toxicoscordion (Zigadenus) fremontii / star lily
Vancouveria hexandra, planipetala / inside-out flower
Clinopodium douglasii / Yerba Buena

Grasses, Rushes (Juncus species) and Sedges (Carex species)

Deer don't eat grasses, although they may browse the forbs growing among them