KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good At It

“Those DARN DEER!”

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If you’re like most serious gardeners in Central Oregon, you want to know: “How do I keep the deer from eating my plants?”

There are many commercial products and home remedies that friends tell you work just great for them, but you may not be so fortunate.

First off – don’t feed the deer on purpose! If you offer yummy food to them on your property, they’ll keep coming back for more! The effectiveness of lure crops has been variable. The added artificial food source may increase deer densities which is just what you DON’T want!

So what’s the best and really only sure way to stop deer from eating your crops or flowers or shrubs or trees? Fencing! If you have just certain plants that are special, you can use individual wire cages or netting to exclude deer. There are a number of options for larger area fencing.

Whichever you choose, it must completely surround the area you want to protect. Don’t leave any openings. Vertical fences need to be at least 8’ tall. A woven wire fence may be the most durable with the least maintenance, but it’s also very expensive to install. Black plastic mesh is effective, but not as durable. Since the mesh is difficult to see, hang strips of cloth or plastic on the mesh so deer won’t run into it. Deer usually won’t jump if they can’t see the other side, so solid fences only need to be 5’ high. Deer are not able to jump both high and wide at the same time, so another option is a slanted fence. It should be at least 4’ high with the angled part at 45 degrees. Or you can use a double row fence - 2 barriers set up 4’ to 5’ high and 4’ to 5’ apart.

Electric fences also can be effective against deer and can be less expensive to install. However they require more maintenance and can short out easily if vegetation grows too high near it. And here’s one I just learned about - a “Peanut Butter Fence”. You can find a link to the plans below, but basically you put peanut butter mixed with cooking oil directly on electric fence wires or in aluminum foil sleeves. The deer want to eat the peanut butter they smell and will get a nice zap on their snout when they touch the electric fence. They usually get the message to stay away from that fenced area.

Yes, fences can be expensive or maybe your homeowners’ association prohibits them, so you may have to turn to the other methods.

You can choose to plant so-called deer-resistant trees and shrubs and plants that are less susceptible to damage. You can find lists below or ask at your local nurseries. But remember, if the deer get hungry enough, they’ll eat just about any plant.

You should harvest your food crops as early as possible – don’t keep the temptation there for them!

There are frightening techniques that are pretty effective, until the deer get used to them. Gas exploders, pyrotechnics, gunfire or barking dogs can all work for a while, but your human neighbors may make you leave and let the deer stay! Motion sensor activated water sprays can work, but the postman won’t bring your mail to your house anymore. My neighbor goes out and waves sheets and claps her hands and yells, but that means she doesn’t get much sleep at night since that’s when the deer are feasting in her yard. In any case, it’s best to vary the scare tactics fairly often.

Then there are the repellents. Some are applied to an area around the plants and the smell discourages the deer, hopefully. But you may have to put up with the smell of putrefied meat, rotten eggs, dried blood or fish emulsion! Some aren’t bad – like bags of human hair or bar soap (no, it doesn’t have to be Irish Spring).

Other repellants are put directly on the plant. These taste bad to the deer. Commercial products may use chemicals or fungicides or hot pepper sauce. This is where gardeners get pretty creative with their own mixtures, but usually they use eggs, garlic, and hot pepper sauce. So, good luck. Most of these products work for a while, but rain or irrigation wash them away. They have to be re-applied pretty often, especially to any new plant growth.

The bottom line is – if the deer are hungry enough, they will eat your plants no matter how bad it smells or tastes.

One other thing those darn deer will do is ruin your trees by rubbing their antlers on the bark to scrape off the velvet in the autumn. To protect small trees, use a protective trunk wrap. The ones you buy at garden centers usually are made of Vexar® tubes. Or, you can use strips of old inner tube or plastic mesh.

More detailed information about these methods are on our website, gocomga.com. Or call us at the OSU Master Gardener Help line at 541-568-6088. Until next time, this has been “Gardening: Get Good at It”.

Reduce Deer Damage in Your Yard <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/deschutes/sites/default/files/ec1557.pdf>

Deer Resistant Plants for Central Oregon <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/deschutes/sites/default/files/deer_resistant_plants_ec.pdf>

Living with Nuisance Wildlife

<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/files/project/pdf/ec1579.pdf>

Deer Resistant Plants – Washington State University <http://spokane-county.wsu.edu/spokane/eastside/Fact%20Sheets/C063%20Deer%20Resistant%20Plants.pdf>

Deer – University of Nebraska (including “Peanut Butter Fence”) <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1045&context=icwdmhandbook>

Deer – University of California <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74117.html>

Deer Management Options – CT Agriculture Experiment Station <http://jcsites.juniata.edu/faculty/ramakrishnan/www/Deer_damage.pdf>

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Singer, Carolyn (2006). Deer in My Garden: The Yucky Flower Series, Volume 1: Perennials & Subshrubs. Garden Wisdom Press.

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