

## Deer in the Garden

by Dr. H. Marc Cathey

**M**Y YEARS OF experience as a host or guest on call-in garden radio shows has familiarized me with the top priorities for gardeners. And the number one concern of gardeners across America is how to control deer.

Why is this such a difficult situation to resolve? The answer is that deer have become a form of sacred cow in our society. Garden pests such as moles, rabbits, voles, and squirrels just don't generate the emotional attachment that people seem to feel for deer. Over the last few decades, we have allowed deer to become the dominant wild animal in the eastern United States. In fact, the deer population in this region is believed to be larger now than it was when European colonists first arrived in the 1600s.

Because deer habitat has in the same time frame been greatly reduced by development, more and more deer are being forced to exist in ever-decreasing green space. Hence our gardens and parks—as well as our roadways—are part of their new habitat. In addition to the annoyance of garden grazing, this has created much more serious problems, including the spread of Lyme disease and a greater incidence of dangerous deer-related vehicle crashes.

I've been around gardening long enough to be aware of the many products available to gardeners to help prevent deer damage—there are as many different products and ideas for controlling deer as there are suggestions for a uniform and fair national health plan.

The type and variety of chemical products that are offered to ward off deer continue to mystify me. Some—such as predator urine, for instance—seem to be



White-tailed deer are common unwanted visitors to gardens in the eastern United States, where they feast on a variety of ornamental plants. One control strategy is to select plants they usually find unpalatable, such as hellebores, left.

so exotic that their efficiency and sustainability for long-term use is questionable. Given that such products must be applied to plants with a wide range of forms, surfaces, and textures, it's evident that no one formulation can have universal application or effectiveness.

The best advice I can give is to apply a number of different approaches to deterring deer. Test a range of products to find the ones that seem to work best, and then rotate their use so the deer don't have time to become used to them. At the same time, put up sections of black mesh deer fencing in places where you know deer come into your garden—deer can't see this fencing and don't like the sensation of running into it. You can change the placement of the fencing

from time to time as well to keep the deer honest. And, of course, be sure to include plants in your garden that are not tasty to deer—lists of plants for your region are usually available through local Extension offices or Master Gardener groups.

After seeing the damage to my garden in the last few winters, I have greatly reduced the amount and variety of plants that they like—such as hostas—so that now there are slim pickin's for them.

In the meantime, I hope our scientists and natural resource managers can come up with humane ways to reduce the deer population. In the end, it will make life better for the deer and for gardeners. 🍀

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