

## Gardening with Deer-Resistant Plants

In York County you are not likely to find any red-nosed reindeer. Instead, you often see the graceful, plentiful white-tailed deer. Sharing our land with these beautiful creatures can sometimes be a challenge when they decide to eat your plants. There are a number of tactics to prevent deer from eating the perennials, shrubs, and trees that you lovingly planted and nurtured. You can try commercial and homemade repellents, scare tactics, and fences, but they can be expensive and meet with varying levels of success.

Perhaps the most effective option to prevent deer from chowing down on your plants is to avoid planting the ones they prefer to eat. Deer preferences vary from region to region, year to year, season to season, and individual to individual. No plant is completely deer proof. A starving deer will eat just about anything. There does tend, though, to be a continuum of tastes among deer that range from most to least preferred. Among their favored plants are daylilies, hosta, hydrangea, rhododendron, and tulips. Serving up this so-called “deer candy” in your yard will have visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads.

The most deer-resistant plants tend to have intense odors, leaves or stems with milky sap, high tannin content, or are coarse, fuzzy, or prickly in texture. Among the trees that deer tend to avoid are beech, birch, black locust, fir, holly, maple, pawpaw, spruce, and tulip poplar. While they do not like eating oak leaves and stems, deer love acorns, especially those of white-oak species. Having lots of acorns for deer and other woodland animals to eat may distract them from eating your plants, although this approach will not work in years when acorns are scarce.

In addition to deer-resistant trees, try planting some native shrubs that deer usually avoid. Bush cinquefoil (*Potentilla fruticosa*), serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*), spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), and all our native viburnum species are deer-resistant. Deer also avoid fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*), also known as polecat bush because its foliage has a strong smell when crushed. On the other hand, deer DO like staghorn (*R. typhina*) and smooth sumac (*R. glabra*), which lack the aroma of fragrant sumac.

There are many native perennials you can enjoy year after year that are usually not browsed by deer. Since deer like to feed near or along the edges of woodlands, planting ferns would be a good choice. All ferns are highly deer-resistant. Most ferns grow well in partially shaded areas with moist soil and high humus content. Depending on the species, they will spread quickly or slowly via underground rhizomes as well as spores, and eventually fill in the area. Among our native species are cinnamon fern, hayscented fern, northern lady fern, northern maidenhair fern, ostrich fern, and sensitive fern. Bleeding heart (*Dicentra*), coral bells (*Heuchera*), mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*), spiderwort (*Tradescantia virginiana*), and wild ginger (*Asarum*) are also deer-resistant, native woodland plants that prefer shade or dappled sunlight.

For sunny locations, good deer-resistant perennials are allium species, blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*), tickseed (*Coreopsis*), and wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*). Deer do not like the fuzzy leaves of plants in the mint family, including beebalm (*Monarda*) and giant hyssop (*Agastache*). Take note that mint species will spread by rhizomes, so be prepared to contain their spread by pulling out unwanted plants or growing them in containers. Milkweeds (*Asclepias*) are another group of plants that deer avoid. If their stems are torn, milkweeds ooze milky sap. Deer learn not to eat milkweed, which contains toxic cardenolides that taste bad and may cause vomiting and heart issues if ingested. Butterfly weed (*Asclepius tuberosa*) is one type of milkweed that thrives in sunny, well-drained soil and produces beautiful orange blossoms June through August. All milkweeds serve as host plants to monarch butterflies.

If you are determined to grow plants that deer love to eat, try to surround them with plants deer do not like. Plant the “deer candy” in the center or back of a bed, then create a barrier by surrounding them with deer-resistant plants. You could also try intermingling strongly scented deer-resistant plants with deer-favored plants. This may cause the deer to overlook all the plants in that area and move on to another feeding spot.

To find out more about specific deer-resistant plants and their needs, check your local library for books on deer-resistant plants, or search the internet. By typing the Latin name of a plant into your search engine, you are more likely to find a reputable website maintained by a university, government agency, or well-known American botanical garden. These sites will tell you about a plant’s light and water needs, ideal soil conditions, whether the plant will spread, and other traits you will need to know for successful gardening. The winter months are a good time to plan your deer-resistant garden.

Beth Jacoby is a Master Gardener in York County. Penn State Master Gardeners are volunteers for Penn State Cooperative Extension. For more information, or to share your experiences in gardening when deer are a problem, contact the Master Gardener office at [YorkMG@psu.edu](mailto:YorkMG@psu.edu).



Photo source:

[https://extension.umn.edu/sites/extension.umn.edu/files/styles/caption\\_medium/public/Photo%20B%20White-tailed%20deer%20eating%20leaves.jpg?itok=0B7aMXah](https://extension.umn.edu/sites/extension.umn.edu/files/styles/caption_medium/public/Photo%20B%20White-tailed%20deer%20eating%20leaves.jpg?itok=0B7aMXah)