

Deer

(Dave Pehling)

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Deer can be very serious garden pests in Washington State, especially in areas where populations are high, or in areas where they are accustomed to people, or where people have been feeding them.

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We have several species of deer here in Washington State. In addition to the mule deer, which is common east of the mountains, on the west side we have the black tail deer, a sub species of mule deer. On the east side in many places, we have the white tail deer. In addition, of course, we also have elk and we even have small populations of moose and caribou in the Northern parts of the state. Now, I am not going to directly address those larger deer species, except that elk can be very damaging and the only effective way to deal with them is by heavy duty fences. Heavy duty hog wire fences such as you seen along the free way and passes, eight feet high. High tension electric fences of the same height can also be effective. Some of the other materials we will be talking about and methods can be marginally effective in some instances for elk.

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All these species of deer can be damaging in certain situations, not only to agriculture but also to home gardeners.

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Now, in some situations gardeners might put up with the damage. In this particular situation, the gardener felt that it was worth having the deer around that they would put with the damage to their pyramidalis. In most cases, gardeners would not really appreciate this.

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Deer cause damage in a number of ways. During the summer, they will rip leaves off of ornamentals and fruit crops. You can tell deer damage, because when they are feeding on leaves, they generally leave that short stalk on the leaf.

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This is another example of deer damage. If they are just nibbling on the leaves in an apple orchard, that is not a really big damaging problem in many situations. But, if you are going to central leader system for semi-dwarf fruit trees, if they keep nipping that central leader, that can cause real problems.

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For instance, this is actually an apple tree. Over the course of several years, the deer kept nipping off the central leader, sprouts came up from the base, and it is going to take a lot of work to bring this apple tree into production.

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Deer damage is very easy to differentiate from that of rabbits, hares, and rodents since deer lack upper incisors. When they browse, they actually just rip the ends off the browse, leaving a very ragged end. Whereas rabbits, hares, and rodents with their meshing incisors leave a very clean cut; usually at about a fourth five degree angle.

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In the fall, the males can also extensive damage to fruit trees and ornamental woody plants when they are rubbing the velvet off their antlers or when they are just sparring.

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All the deer species are very important game animals in Washington state. So, the Department of Fish and Wildlife is fairly particular about how these animals are controlled.

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The best and most versatile control for the deer species are various kinds of fencing. In areas where damage is just beginning to take place from our smaller deer species sometimes a simple, single strand baited electric fence will do the job. This is nothing more than a single, regular electric fence. And, periodically, about every three feet, down the wire, little tents of tin foil are stuck to the wire with double stick tape and a little bit of peanut butter or peanut oil put on the underside. In situation like this, the deer will often come up and touch that tin foil with their sensitive noses and get a pretty good jolt. And, sometimes that will keep them from feeding in that general area.

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In places where deer are determined to feed in the garden, you need a better quality fence. Ordinarily for black tail and mule deer, you need to go about six feet high, maybe a little higher. If you don't want to go that high, you can get by with a lower fence in many cases. In this one, this one was only 57 inches tall. But, you need a thirty inch electric outrigger on this one. And this is one of the high tension electric fences. These can be very effective.

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Now if you want to try something even simpler, deer don't like to jump any long distances. So, two parallel electric fences, low to the ground, will often keep deer out of a garden or orchard.

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This is the standard deer and elk fence. For elk, you want to go about 7 or 8 feet high. For deer, you can sometimes get by with a 6 foot fence. This is solid hog wire, and it needs to encircle the garden completely.

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As you probably know, there are a many kinds of repellents on the market for deer. And, there are a number of them registered in Washington State. However, these are not always effective, and there are none listed that Master Gardeners may recommend specifically. Research has shown, though, that those containing egg solids are most consistently effective in most situations. Bear in mind though, that if the deer are accustomed to feeding in an area, or if feeding pressure is high, they will probably cause some damage anyway. Repellents do usually limit the amount of damage, though.

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There are many other things that can be used to scare deer away from the garden. The recent motion detector sprinklers are highly effective for deer, although they only cover a small area of the garden. Prices of those are coming down, so they are more reasonable than they used to be. Anything that will flash in the breeze, the bird flash tape, or even square pieces of aluminum foil attached to lines so they wave in the breeze can work. Plastic sheeting or chicken wire placed flat on the ground around the garden can deter deer also. They don't like to step on that. It doesn't feel natural to them. Even some fertilizers, the organic fertilizers: blood meals, bone meals things like that, can be repellent to deer if they are used in the garden. Many other things have been tried: human hair, Zoo Doo, all sorts of things. And, in some instances, they are marginally effective but they are not highly recommended because they are so inconsistent.

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Of course a fenced yard and a noisy dog are probably the ultimate of the vertebrate repellents. If you have a dog in a fenced yard, and it is a good sized dog and it is not chained up, that's highly effective in keeping deer out. If you chain your dog in the yard, deer will quickly learn very exactly how long that chain is and feed in other places of the yard anyway.

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Another thing you can do, if you are just planting ornamentals, there are a number of plants that are listed as deer resistant. There is probably no such thing as deer proof

plants except maybe some of the cacti. In most situations, there are a number of plants that will work, and feeding damage will be a minimum in most situations. The Department of Fish and Wildlife has this particular list online - the deer proof, or close to it, plants for Washington landscapes.