

Wild Things: Deer Crabby?

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“Wild Things” answers wildlife questions often fielded by shelters and animal control officers. For more tips on handling encounters with wild animals humanely, visit humansociety.org/wildlife.

Remember when seeing deer at the edge of your lawn was a real Kodak moment? How times have changed. Thanks in part to the suburbanization of America and the well-fertilized buffets in our yards and gardens, white-tailed deer are now thriving. They’re the largest native wildlife most of us will ever lay eyes on, but these days many people are far less jazzed about spotting Bambi and friends on the back forty.

Not surprisingly, deer-vs.-garden grievances are common among homeowners. If your organization receives complaints or questions, advise callers that it’s possible to peacefully coexist with deer *and* have an attractive garden. Gardeners just need to stay one cloven hoof ahead of them.

While there’s no such thing as a truly “deer-resistant” plant—would that it were so simple!—plenty of attractive plants are unsavory to deer unless they’re desperate for a meal. Think of prickly, fuzzy, or especially aromatic plants (like mint or yarrow); ferns and ornamental grasses; or

anything in the daffodil family, to cite a few examples. Savvy gardeners also use native plants, since they’re more likely to have evolved natural mechanisms to deter or survive deer foraging. To learn more about the palates of deer in your area, contact your local cooperative extension office, nursery, or garden club.

Repellents can also be effective in giving deer the humane heave-ho. Start with low-tech strategies, like hanging soap bars on trees and shrubs. Commercial repellents can also do the trick. Apply as soon as you notice damage, and reapply regularly, especially after rain. Alternating types of products will keep deer on their toes—er, hooves. But there’s nothing like good fences to make good neighbors, and indeed fencing is the best and most permanent way to resolve deer conflicts. Designs include plastic mesh, electrified polytape, woven wire, and electric fence kits.

Steer clear of using the increasingly popular and widely available predator urines as a deterrent: Besides showing negligible effectiveness, these products are likely to come from “fur farms,” which inhumanely raise and kill wild animals for their pelts. AS

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