

Tips on detouring garden nibblers

- Ray Moritz

Wednesday, March 30, 2005



Q: What can I do about deer damage? They have scarred my young trees by rubbing their antlers on the trunks and have browsed down half of my garden.

A: Some of my readers like to throw me real softballs like, "What can I do about winter?" or "How do I persuade deer to be 100 percent carnivores?" No problem.

There are four easy ways to get rid of deer.

- 1) Go on a low-carb diet of all venison all the time.
- 2) Hire Caltrans as your landscape designer. You could get free garden ideas from the center islands of highways 80, 580 and 680.
- 3) Stop feeding your Irish wolfhounds and turn them loose.
- 4) Build a 6-plus-foot fence, extending 6 inches below the ground, around your entire property.

Professionally, I can't really recommend three of these brilliant cures because:

Considering how many hunters become collateral damage of their own sport, urban hunting might bag more gardeners than deer.

Considering the Caltrans' Bay Bridge boondoggle, the design may never be completed, not to mention the cost overruns ...

The Irish wolfhounds might eat the Englishman next door.

And if you opt for the fence, be sure to check with your town about fence height restrictions and hope that the deer don't start taking steroids.

Having said all that, I will go where most sane arborists fear to tread. Most deer damage to trees, shrubs and vines is not irreversible. Young plants are the most likely to suffer damage, and young, vigorous plants will most likely heal rapidly.

Consider that most of those big, beautiful oaks you see gracing our hillsides were chewed down for decades before they finally escaped the four-legged weed whacker and grew to be magnificent trees. After horn rubbing you may need to install trunk protection until the bark calluses over.

Also, check the dead tissue in the wound for softness (decay) until it heals. Browsed and broken branches should be lightly pruned back to secondary twigs that are at least half the diameter of the primary branch and extending in the direction you want the branch to grow. Generally shrubs heal and grow back more quickly after deer browsing.

Four strategies to reduce deer damage:

If you plant young trees or shrubs where they cannot be protected by fencing, place three tree support stakes in an equilateral triangle around them. Place them at the edge of the root ball, so as not to interfere with branch or trunk growth. Always remove the nursery stake first. For trees that have thin, tender bark, you may need a trunk protector long after the need for support has passed. Many varieties are available from horticultural suppliers.

You can also physically protect seedlings and trunks of young trees and shrubs by planting them with protector tubes like Tubex. Deer repellents such as Plant Pro-Tec, which clips on like a clothespin, or Deer Away can be effective (see www.forestry-suppliers.com or search for keywords such as arborist supplies, forestry supplies, gardening supplies or nursery supplies).

Select species that develop tough, abrasion-resistant bark quickly. These include: coast live oak, California black oak, Douglas fir, most other oaks, native pines, native cypress, coast redwood, incense cedar, atlas and deodar cedar.

There are a number of deer resistant species for the Bay Area. There may even be a few species that are actually "deer proof." You probably have seen them on those highway islands, like oleander or juniper (Watch out! Juniper burns like a pile of old tires!).

Other deer-resistant species include cypress, buckeye, Douglas fir, many pines, incense cedar, ash, redwood and bay laurel. Some common nonnatives are Japanese maple, Bailey's acacia, mimosa, carob (choose male carobs only), Grecian laurel, Victorian box, magnolia, olive, podocarpus, New Zealand Christmas tree, bottlebrush, peppermint willow, strawberry tree, marina madrone (thin bark), carrotwood, Australian willow and many others. Lists of deer-resistant plants appear in a number of gardening books. Just remember, "deer resistant" does not mean "deer proof."

Remember, if a plant is repellent to deer, it may contain alkaloids, glycosides or other chemicals that are toxic to children. Before you purchase any plant, tree or shrub be sure to check the Cornell University poisonous plant Web site: www.ansci.cornell.edu/plants.