

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 06-26-02) , ©2005

Chuck and Anna Hower emailed asking about deer deterrents or deer-proof plants. There's good news and bad news on the deer front. The good news is their tastes change from year to year so sometimes your nibbled, drastically deer-pruned plants can recover. The bad news is they'll probably nibble anything and everything in your gardens sooner or later.

Roses seem to be their favorite food. The younger and more tender the better. Even older thorny roses sometimes appeal to them. Deer happily munch away, thorns and all. Many of the articles on deer proof plantings suggest thorny, prickly, spiky plants. "Except for roses, deer love roses," say the articles. Alas.

Mel White published an article called "Oh, Deer!" in May 1998. White lists these commercial products: "Ropel," "Hinder," "Millorganite," "Deer Off," "Hot Pepper Wax," "Thiram" (VERY SMELLY), "Predator" (fox, coyote urine), "Tree Guard," and "Not Tonight Deer." I'm not sure if all these products are available locally. Remember the rule – if the pest (i.e. deer) isn't listed on the label it won't work. White also recommends manure from a local zoo (lion, cougar, other carnivores). And, finally, he suggests using car deodorizers. All odiferous products will dissipate in the rain and need to be reapplied.

My friend Julie, from Omaha, Nebraska lives on the edge of a forest. Once a week she visits local dog groomers and beauty shops and collects human and animal hair and spreads it along the perimeters of her vegetable garden. But if it rains she makes extra trips to the hair suppliers and repeats the deterrent practice. You might try her methods.

I have several Master Gardener neighbors within a half-mile radius of my house. Our immediate neighborhood doesn't seem to have a deer problem, but all four of my Master Gardener friends nearby see Bambi and all his relatives dining in their gardens on a daily basis. Maybe the deer are well fed next door and they don't venture up into our neighborhood.

The deer foods of choice reported by disgruntled gardeners in Kitsap are mostly roses, roses and more roses with vegetables and fruit trees thrown in for good measure. When they need a snack after gorging on roses, deer seem to wander through the gardens sampling as they go. Dave Peters says he's seen deer decapitate his tomato plants (which deer aren't supposed to like) and then the deer spit the samplings out. Others report nibbling of daffodils (even though they're poisonous).

Mary Robson King County Extension Agent says, "Deer prefer tender new growth. If plants have been over-fertilized, they are likely to be more chewed." She adds that deer will avoid aromatic plants like rosemary, lavender and santolina. "Stout fencing is the only permanent solution. If the deer can't see through a fence they are less likely to jump over it," Robson says. Barking dogs seem to work well too, she said.

Many deer-proof plant lists suggest using these perennials: Aquilegia (Columbine), Artemesia, Delphinium (Larkspur), Digitalis (Fox Glove), Hellebore, Iris, Kniphofia (red-hot poker), Lupine, Narcissus (Daffodil), Oxalis, Phormium tenax (New Zealand Flax), Trillium, Tulip and Calla Lily. For Shrubs try: Berberis (Common Barberry), Buddleia davidii (Butterfly Bush), Calycanthus (Western Spice Bush), Choisya ternate (Mexican Orange), Cornus stolonifera (Red Osier Dogwood), Cotinus coggygria (Smoke Tree), Daphne, Forsythia, Jasmine, Juniper, Leucothoe, Oleander, Pieris japonica, Rhododendron, Sambucus racemosa (Red Elderberry) and Syringa vulgaris (Common lilac). Suggested vines are: Clematis, Solanum (Nightshade), Tecomaria capensis (Cape Honeysuckle) and Wisteria floribunda (Japanese Wisteria).

So, Chuck and Ann, and deer-plagued gardeners, I'll pass on any proven deer deterrents I discover in the months to come. In the meantime let's all use deer pruning as an excuse to add new plants to our gardens.

The dedicated Master Gardeners at three of our local treasured gardens asked me to remind you to visit them this summer. Every Monday from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. take the kids to the Raab Park Youth Garden (up Caldart Street) for gardening crafts and activities. Also in the north end visit the walled garden full of sensual delights at the Northwest College of Arts. The entrance is across from the George Fireworks Stand. In Central Kitsap visit the Anna Smith Children's Garden on Tracyton Boulevard about one block from Fairgrounds Road. All three gardens are perfect for a picnic too.