

What Can I Plant That the Deer Won't Eat?

How many times have we all heard that question, or asked it ourselves? It seems like a perfectly legitimate question. But it is the wrong question, and asking it implies an assumption that is seldom, if ever, true. We ask it because we have all heard a couple of common phrases, "deer-proof" and "deer-resistant", and we assume there are plants that fall into these categories.

Is this or that plant deer-proof or deer-resistant, we ask, as though a plant has some kind of immunity to being eaten. It doesn't. It is not up to the plant, it's the deer that decides what to eat.

We tend to anthropomorphize the issue by thinking about the kind of things we would want to avoid and assume a deer would act the same way. We usually think of things that have thorns or prickles, a bad odor, or a disgusting texture as things deer would not like to eat. But it turns out that some of the things that deer really like to eat have thorns or prickles (*e.g.* greenbrier), and some of the things they seldom eat appear to have none of the above characteristics.

We often think that it is the properties of the plant that cause a deer to eat it or to avoid it, and that will hold true wherever the plant is found. But what does and does not get eaten depends more on what else is available and how many deer there are. Deer, like us, have food preferences, things they really like to eat, things they usually eat if available, and things they usually avoid.

Given the choice between a bologna sandwich, a hamburger or a t-bone steak, most of us will go for the steak. But if there aren't any steaks left, we will be happy enough to have a hamburger. And if bologna sandwiches are all that are left, if we are hungry enough, we will likely take that. Deer do the same thing. They will almost always go after any Spanish oak (Texas red oak), kidneywood or coral honeysuckle they can reach, but will usually leave any cowpen daisy, mealy blue sage or willow baccharis alone.

A given plant in my yard might be eaten to the ground, but that same plant might go untouched in your yard if you have a lot of things that are higher up the deer food preference list. In other words, what is eaten depends on what else there is to eat.

In most areas, what is available to eat is at least somewhat determined by how many deer there are, since in areas of high deer populations most of the highly preferred plants will have been eaten to extinction. Thus in those areas the deer are probably routinely eating things on the bottom of their food preference list. And if the deer

population is high enough and the area is largely browsed out, starving deer might eat almost anything.

If that sounds extreme to you, then, like most of us, you have probably never been really, really hungry. But I remember as a kid having a Sunday School teacher tell us about his experiences in a German POW camp during the war, and how they ate cockroaches!

If you think about that, you can understand why deer sometimes eat things they are “not supposed to eat”, things that are “deer-resistant” or “deer-proof”. Maybe we should quit using those terms.

So what can you plant that the deer won't eat? The short, accurate answer is, probably, rocks. But that isn't much help. The best answer is to plant native plants that are on the low end of the deer preference list as those plants are the least likely to be eaten, but know that if the deer are desperate, they might eat those plant too. Next week I will give you a list of some of the less-favored plants that might escape deer predation.

On the other hand, if you have a fenced-in area that deer can't get to, then planting things that are the highest on the deer food preference list would be great, because those are the species that are rapidly declining in the Hill Country due to the high deer populations and you will be helping maintain the species. Until next time.....

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