

How to garden & deal with our deer/elk population

First, I want to state that this information is not backed by scientific or federal wildlife investigation. It is only advice gleaned from personal experience at our place here in Eagle Hill Ranch.

When asked about what deer eat, one of our homeowners said, "They eat everything!" That just about sums up the dilemma gardeners face here at Eagle Hill Ranch, and in fact, everywhere deer and elk abound.

One thing to remember is that deer are wild, they are not potential pets, they can be dangerous if they are allowed or encouraged to hang around homes. They can be potential sources of disease and they can attract predators like cougars. So, please don't feed the ungulates.

Getting Started: We live on soil that was left behind after mountain glaciers receded, so don't be surprised when you find there are lots of rocks of all sizes to deal with. I have given up using a shovel to initially dig in favor of a pick. Our soil is very heavy to clay, so before planting the soil needs to be amended. There is a product called clay buster that is sold by the bag at Murdoch's in Montrose. It is a combination of gypsum, pumice and organic material. Also, using composted manure helps. Since horses are the gift that keeps on giving that product, you might check in with our local horse stable.

We don't live in an area where natural moisture coming from the sky is a frequent occurrence. Nor do we have irrigation water, so it is wise to install an irrigation system that uses less water. The better and most economical system is drip irrigation. Also, it is wise to consider plants that don't need a lot of moisture.

Trees and shrubs: You will notice that most of your neighbors have wire fencing surrounding their trees and shrubs. Not only do deer and elk eat trees and shrubs, bucks and bulls in the fall will spend time thrashing away at trees and shrubs with their antlers. Native bushes, like willows are quite capable of regrowth after the damage, but if your trees/shrubs are not protected, they will either die or be misshapen. These animals are very partial to young trees, so when they are planted, they need protection **immediately** (many trees and bushes have fallen to overnight raids). Spruce, Pines, Cottonwoods and Aspen are most commonly planted. The best way to provide protection is use of T-posts and at least 5 feet tall heavy wire fencing.

Yes, you can try to use either homemade sprays or commercial deer repellents (Liquid Fence concentrate seemed to be the most effective) to keep the animals from dining on your valuable plants and trees. However, trying to do this is not only a lot of effort, in the case of commercial repellents, it is expensive. The problem is that plants and trees need moisture, so rains and irrigation wash the repellents off the plants.

If you want to have some flowers, then you need to choose plants that are "resistant" to deer/elk. I put resistant in quotes, because there is no guarantee that your plant won't get damaged. I have noticed in the spring that lots of plants are bitten off, but not eaten. Here we have a learning process. This is because 'junior' is trying out potential meals. After finding that the plant is not tasty, or gives a stomach ache, then that particular plant will be avoided. However, plants that give off strong smells, or are prickly can have a better chance of avoiding the learning process.

One thing to keep in mind is that plants that survive are very capable of being "garden thugs". Either through aggressive root systems or seeding they can take over.

So, with all the former in mind, here are some plants that are capable of surviving our deer/elk population:

First, consider the local flora. Wildflowers have learned how to survive the climate and the animals.

Always check the climate zone of any potential plant choice. Our zone is 3.

Plants that have strong smells: Catmint (there are many varieties); Oregano (also a member of the mint family and yes, you can cook with it) Russian sage; Achillea (common name Yarrow-many varieties and colors to choose from); Salvia- which is a fancy name for another member of the sage family; dianthus (also called pinks); Mexican Hat; Helenium (common name-sneeze weed-mine doesn't make me sneeze); Shasta Daisy; Creeping Thyme; Alliums; Artemisia (silver colored which is a true neutral that goes well with other colors in the plant family).

Prickly/Fuzzy: One of my favorites is Cone Flowers (Echinacea). They come in a variety of colors, they attract bees & butterflies (Monarchs, too) and don't require a lot of moisture; Gloriosa Daisy (Black eyed Susans); Lambs Ears (Stachys byzantina) is a good ground cover, but it, well... can cover ground rapidly; Barberries are good shrubs that get little damage, but an occasional buck in rut will take a swing at them.

Not high on the deer's menu To quote my neighbor, again, "deer will eat everything". Spirea is a bush that will give you nice colors throughout the growing season (many varieties); Potentilla (also called: Cinquefoil, Five fingers, silverweed) This comes in a variety of types: bush, ground cover, flowering plant; Iris (many sizes, colors, and blooming times) This plant can take a beating and come back, even though it often gets eaten to the ground; Daffodils (forget tulips-they are "deer candy") Not all daffodils survive the "learning process", but most do.

I refer to roses as "deer candy". If you really want to plant one, it needs the same protection as your trees and shrubs.

Good luck and Happy Gardening! Judy Yeo