

The Deer Are Back

By Susan Camp

Yes, the deer are back, and they are hungry. We have a Gang of Seven that saunter through almost every morning and evening. I am sure they discuss the level of tastiness of every shrub or perennial they pass.

They have consumed almost every daylily bud and hosta leaf and even ate the leaves of a small rose bush I have been nursing along for several years. Of course, earlier this spring, they nipped the azalea buds.

A few mornings ago, I stepped out of my kitchen door to find a lovely doe munching on the leaves of one of three huge hostas located outside our picket fence. She looked up at me, then flounced off into the woods and stood there, staring at me and daring me to say anything. Sadly, she returned for another hosta that night.

I know that Jim and I are not the only Gloucester residents suffering from the depredation of our plants by these large, four-footed eating machines. According to the Cornell University Cooperative Extension fact sheet "White-tailed Deer," an adult buck, weighing 125 to 250 pounds, requires 4,000 to 6,000 calories daily, which equals four to six pounds of greenery from the garden.

What can we do to protect our property from Bambi and family? Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication HORT 62NP presents five options for deterring deer: accept the damage; select plants that deer find unpalatable; build deer fences; plant in a safe location; install noise, light, or sprinkler devices to frighten deer; use deer repellents. Most of the articles I have read echo this list of deterrents. Several articles include control of the deer population as a sixth option. The problem is that over time the deer become accustomed to both repellents and motion detectors.

If we are not willing to accept deer damage, we may need to look for plants they don't like to eat, although we must consider the possible downside of introducing exotic invasive species into our gardens.

I won't attempt this project in the summer heat, but I have decided to move the daylilies and hostas from the outside border to inside the fence where they will be protected from the mouths of hungry deer. Part of the border is filled with a stand of obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*) and an old coal scuttle containing whirling butterflies (*Gaura lindheimeri*). Both plants tolerate deer.

It won't be difficult to find deer resistant perennials to fill the rest of the border. The front side already contains two large blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) 'Blueberry Sundae' plants and one yellow *Baptisia sphaerocarpa* 'Solar Flare' Prairieblues™. In between, I will plant Blue Star

(*Amsonia tabernaemontana*) a lovely native perennial with finely textured foliage and tiny blue flowers. *Amsonia* attracts pollinators and also resists deer.

Many deer resistant perennials are members of the mint or sage family (Lamiaceae). These plants tend to be strongly aromatic, and many have fuzzy, textured, gray-green or silvery foliage. You can also recognize most members of the mint family by their square stems and opposite leaves. Deer detest many of them, including both the culinary and ornamental salvias, lavender, rosemary, thyme, basil, oregano, and marjoram.

One of my favorite members of the mint family is catmint (*Nepeta x faassenii*), a hybrid with pale lavender to deep blue flowers and silvery green leaves and stems. Catmint blooms cheerfully all summer, beloved by bees and undaunted by drought or deer, although it needs a good shearing at midsummer to prevent legginess. Its slightly coarser cousin, catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), also resists deer. Both *Nepetas* attract cats.

Another of my favorite mint family members is Russian sage (*Salvia yangii*, formerly called *Perovskia atriplicifolia* after a Russian general). Someone decided a few years ago that Russian sage is a *salvia*, which is funny because I think we all knew that from its foliage, fragrance, and flower shape. Also, it has square stems and opposite leaves.