

Deer Resistant-Native Plants

By Susan Camp

Whenever Middle Peninsula gardeners get together, the discussion eventually turns to the frustration of losing expensive perennials and shrubs to those large, four-footed eating machines known as white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). 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 ten pounds of greenery from the garden.

In the wild, that buck would consume grasses, wildflowers, leaves, twigs, and buds from late spring through summer. During the fall he would forage on beechnuts, acorns, and wild cherry seeds, and he would eat twigs and buds almost exclusively during the winter and early spring.

When we humans move in, we plant pretty flower gardens, tasty shrubs and fruit trees, and all kinds of wonderful vegetables. The deer soon discover that their neighborhood has become a giant smorgasbord, and they can find delicious food year-round, and there is nothing that people can do about it. Well, there is something that could be done, but this is not a cooking column.

I met someone recently who is planning an extensive landscape project. She asked me about native perennials and shrubs that deer don't eat. I have to be clear about this: There are plants that deer generally will pass by, but if they are hungry enough, they will eat almost anything.

Many deer resistant perennials are mints or salvias, members of the 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, both native and introduced species. In general, your kitchen herbs are safe from Bambi and his mom, as are the catnip (*Nepeta cataria*) and its cousin catmint (*Nepeta x faassenii*), two popular introduced species. Your cats will be happy to hear this.

One of my favorite native deer-resistant plants is a shrubby upright perennial called blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*), a member of the pea family. The clover-like leaves are deep bluish-green. Purple flowers bloom on erect spikes in May. Bees and butterflies love false blue indigo and its cousin, wild yellow indigo (*Baptisia tinctoria*), which bears yellow pea-like flowers from May to July.

At least three species of Joe-Pye weed are native to our area, sweet Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*), hollow Joe-Pye weed (*E. fistulosum*), and three-nerved Joe-Pye weed (*E. dubium*). These purple-flowered plants grow up to 8 feet tall and make a perfect backdrop to a perennial border. There are several dwarf varieties. Joe-Pye weed blooms from July to September or October. All three native Joe-Pye weed species tolerate deer. American boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*) is a similar tall perennial with fragrant white flowers that attract butterflies, birds, and native bees. Boneset also tolerates deer.

Other native perennials that are likely to survive grazing by deer include eastern prickly pear (*Opuntia humifusa*), dense blazing star (*Liatris spicata*), cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), and (blue mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*). Watch out for blue mistflower, though. It is lovely and has a heavenly scent, but it is aggressive and can spread quickly.

Some native shrubs that tolerate deer include summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), arrowwood (*Viburnum dentatum*), spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*), and mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*).

Several native ferns demonstrate deer resistance, including southern lady fern (*Athyrium asplenoides*); royal fern (*Osmunda spectabilis*); cinnamon fern (*Osmundastrum cinnamomeum*); and Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*).

Helpful hint: Shop for native plants by their Latin or botanical names to avoid purchasing an introduced species.

The publication “Native Plants for Southeast Virginia including Hampton Roads Region” includes information on numerous deer-resistant natives suitable for planting on the Middle Peninsula. For further information, go to www.plantvirginianatives.org and <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/nativeplants>.

See also NCState Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox and Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder for information on deer resistance and tolerance.