

Managing Deer & Rabbits in Your Landscape

Deer and Rabbits: Garden Public Enemy #1

Bambi and Thumper . . . you remember them, right? Young, cute and furry. Well, those critters aren't really as wholesome and cute as the picture books and Disney movies of your childhood portrayed. In fact, they are Public Enemy #1 and can decimate your garden in short order if left unchecked.

Do some detective work and take action to ensure the fruits of your labor are secured from the work of these fuzzy little felons.

Investigating the Crime Scene

Any good investigator will survey the crime scene and dig for incriminating evidence.

When do they strike? Generally, the suspects to their best work under the cover of night. Deer may also feed in the early morning or at dusk. Spring and summer are the heaviest feeding seasons, but . . .

What attracts them? Rabbits love veggies, flowers and tender young plants. Their favorites include: lettuce, beans, broccoli, pansies, marigolds and petunias. Deer have a varied diet of herbaceous and woody plants. So, ornamental and garden plants are all on the menu. Fact sheet [HLA-6427](#) details a comprehensive list of Oklahoma plants that deer prefer.

What's in their toolbox? The tools of the trade are incisors. Deer have only lower biting teeth while rabbits have upper and lower teeth. So, deer will roughly tear foliage while rabbits will bite cleanly through. Damage to trees may occur more often in the fall during "rut" season as bucks rub their antlers against the bark.

What evidence do they leave behind? Evidence may be obvious or subtle. Along with the plant damage stated above, signs of digging, recessed bedding spots and tufts of fur may be present if rabbits are the culprit. Deer will leave upside-down heart-shaped tracks (if the ground is soft enough) or trampled areas.

While not as unique as a fingerprint, both animals will (literally and figuratively) leave behind the processed results of their consumption. Rabbit droppings are in the form of small, pea-sized, mostly scattered pellets; deer excrement is similar in shape (pellet or pill-like), but can be scattered or in scat (piles).

Preventing Unlawful Entry - Physical Barriers

By far, physical barriers are the best prevention for unlawful break-ins.

Rabbits: These critters like to go incognito. They prefer to eat without the threat of predation. Examine areas that may encourage entry or safe habitat while they munch. Block access points in fencing or walls and clear brush, grasses and low shrubs that may offer cover. Allow natural predators to police the neighborhood. Cats, hawks and snakes curb populations nicely.

Rabbits can burrow and jump, so fencing (1" or smaller wire mesh) will need to be buried 3-6" deep and be a minimum of 2" tall. When burying the fence, angle the buried portion out to discourage burrowing.

Netting or chicken wire may be draped over tender or young seedlings and anchored but, for larger plants, encircling the foliage may be necessary for proper control. Ensure the barrier is anchored well and inspect often for disruption.

Deer: A deer can clear most decorative fences so not just any vertical structure will keep them out. Most effective are 8' or taller fences constructed with polyethylene or posts and hog wire. Electric fences are also an option. For details and specifications on constructing an effective deer fence, see this [fact sheet](#).

Young trees may also fall victim to deer browsing, tramping and rubbing. Encircle trees with an 8' cylinder of hog wire for best results.

Disarming the Felons - Repellants

Home-remedy and commercially-available repellants can be used for both deer and rabbits, either through direct plant contact (taste deterrent) or area (smell deterrent).

Everything from bar soap to human hair to granular predatory animal urine has been used with some success, but efficacy will vary by season, nutritional needs and existing food availability. Any contact product should be used according to the label instructions for safe human consumption. Consider also the relative cost of reapplying deterrents that may wear off with time or rain exposure.

Thwart the Thieves - Scare Tactics and Crop Selection

Rabbits and deer are clever and can tell in time if that fake owl or sprinkler spray or noisy pie-pan isn't a real threat. So, if you plan to use these techniques, rotate them often. A dog with full access to the yard and a dislike for unwelcome guests is also good ammunition. Absent a canine, defensive plant selection is also something to try. Plant a garden including those that will dissuade burglars from stealing your prized crop, either as a border or next to those needing protection.

Deer do not like rhubarb, asparagus, and garlic. [Keeping Deer Out of the Garden](#) is a good resource by Bonnie Plants for more information. Tomatoes and onions can be desirable depending on what else is available. For a comprehensive list of Oklahoma plants and whether deer are known to consume or avoid them, consult fact sheet [HLA-6427](#).

Rabbits also turn their noses up to asparagus and rhubarb. According to [Keeping Rabbits Out of the Garden](#) by Bonnie Plants, rabbits will hop past leeks, onions, potatoes, squash and tomatoes. They also will avoid geraniums and wax begonias, and herbs like basil and mint.

While no one method can be totally effective, a comprehensive strategy of multiple techniques (barriers, scare tactics, deterrents and crop selection) can help control deer and rabbit damage to your garden. Prevent when you can, but be vigilant. Bambi and Thumper are actually criminal con-artists in disguise. Don't let their fuzzy cuteness fool you.