

December 22, 2008

Passing the Buck . . . and the Doe and the Fawn

Sipping coffee on your back deck on a beautiful fall morning, you look up and gasp -- there in your suburban oasis stands a small herd of deer. For a moment you pause, enchanted. An instant later, as the deer begin to munch on your landscape, you realize they're just not as awestruck by the encounter as you are.

You don't have to be a wildlife expert to know that after generations of dwelling in close proximity to humans, modern deer aren't afraid of us anymore. What's more, they no longer fear many of the traditional repellents some homeowners still use to protect shrubs, trees and landscaping. So when cool weather comes along and the natural landscape dies, deer have to start foraging for food sources. And they aren't afraid to walk right into your yard and help themselves to your well-watered, well-established evergreens.

Even just a few deer can cause significant damage to your landscaping. "A single whitetail deer can consume, on average, 8 to 12 pounds of foliage a day," says James Messina of Messina Wildlife Management. "In many areas of the country, deer overpopulation is a serious problem. With nowhere to go and not much left to eat in the dead of winter, deer can wreak havoc on shrubs, trees and gardens, and destroy new buds and leaves before they have a chance to grow, ruining your prospects for any spring growth."

Hungry and bold, deer move into residential areas in the winter, and the damage they do in the cold weather will affect your landscape's health next spring. Traditional animal repellents are also less effective than they were decades ago, Messina notes.

"That's because those repellents rely on a bad smell -- like the stench of a rotting carcass -- to fool animals into thinking a predator's kill is in the area and the predator may be returning for it," he says. "But the number of predators has actually declined, and deer know it. They're less afraid of predators, so relying on scare tactics has a greater tendency to fail over time."

Some wildlife has also built up a resistance to chemical deterrents. Plus, increasingly eco-conscious homeowners prefer not to put potentially harmful chemicals into the environment. Other more lethal alternatives are not only inhumane but illegal in most parts of the country.

More homeowners are turning to an alternative, like Deer Scram, blended from selected organic components. This organic option works because it confronts deer by using their natural repulsion to certain plant smells and tastes rather than relying on fear.

"We know that deer will eat over 500 different types of plants," Messina says. "Normally, they're quite discriminating. But in fall and winter, when food is harder to find, they become less picky and much more of a threat to suburban landscapes. Still, like many wild animals, deer rely on taste and smell to judge if a food may be harmful to them. If your backyard foliage tastes or smells unpleasant to them, one bite and they'll move on."

An effective taste deterrent, Deer Scram is organic and completely safe for use on all types of plants -- from vegetables to trees, flowers to shrubs. For individual plants and bushes, sprinkle Deer Scram liberally around the plants and bushes to be protected. For small garden plots/flower beds (10 feet by 15 feet) sprinkle liberally in a 16-inch strip surrounding the entire bed or plot. The initial application of Deer Scram must be heavy so as to visibly cover the ground around the plants and shrubs to be protected. The strip should be applied 18 inches from the edge of the plants being protected.

"In the early 1900s, there were probably only about half a million deer spread out over the country," Messina says. "Today, there are more than 15 million. Deer, it turns out, adapt quite well to life in suburbia. Keeping them away from residential and commercial landscaping can help everyone -- deer and homeowners -- co-exist more happily together."

For more information about becoming 'deer proof,' contact us at (703) 330-3400 or email us at wewerka@wewerkalandscape.com