

# Dissuading Deer From Your Garden

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Living in a development surrounded on three sides by Middle Run Valley Natural Area, which is contiguous with White Clay Creek State Park, we were used to seeing herds of a dozen or more deer in our garden. Plant and terrain damage was extensive and depressing – and the personal experience of infections (Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever etc.) was too debilitating to ignore. However, in the past three years we have had only a couple of fawns enter our garden – except during the big snows of January/February 2010 when nothing worked! There are many approaches to dissuading deer from your garden but the combination of approaches described below has worked very well for us.

What about such approaches as ten foot fences, Irish Spring Soap, coyote urine etc. etc? All have their problems. First of all it is vital to understand that deer communicate very effectively by scent. Their cloven hooves contain scent glands, as do their hocks and other locations on their bodies. If a fawn strays from its mother, she can trace it by its scent trail. Deer also mark out territories in the same way that cats and dogs – you do not want them “marking” *your* garden. As they wander their trails, deer leave a scent trail with the message: “deer were here before – safe area”. If there is no deer scent present, deer will avoid the area since they get the opposite message: “unsafe area – stay away!” The approaches we describe below largely depend on *convincing* deer that your garden is an area that is unsafe for them so that they *will* stay away!

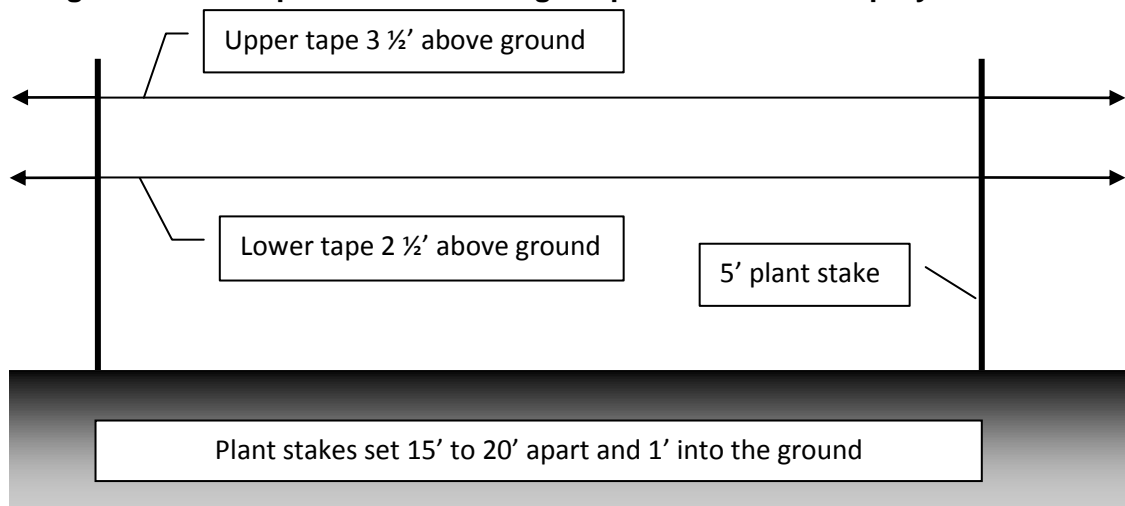
- 1. Grow deer resistant plants.** A common misconception is that “deer will eat anything and everything”. The book “Deer Proofing Your Garden” (Rhonda Hart) lists only a half page of “deer favorites” but 12 pages of “Deer Resistant Plants” and even half a page of “Deer Repelling Plants”. The “resistant” list includes a wide variety annuals, bulbs and rhizomes, ground covers, ornamental grasses, bamboos, perennials, shrubs and trees. Most garden centers provide lists of resistant plants and label them as such. Mail-order nurseries also mark deer resistant plants in their listings. There is at least one nursery [www.deerxlandscape.com](http://www.deerxlandscape.com) that raises all of its stock without deterrents, permitting deer to roam at will. Anything that is nibbled is removed from their catalog. Check out their plant list, or buy locally! *Be aware, however, that growing such plants will not keep deer out of your garden.* Deer will still follow their trails so terrain damage and the danger of infection from deer tick bites remain.
- 2. Milorganite Lawn Fertilizer:** This is a true “two-fer” since it dissuades deer *and* fertilizes your lawn at the same time. Although it consists of reconstituted and pelletized Milwaukee sewage sludge it does not have an offensive odor to humans. It is available at most area garden centers (including Gateway and Alexanders) and can be applied using a typical lawn fertilizer drop-spreader. For specific plants or beds create a “shaker” from a coffee can with holes drilled in the plastic lid to sprinkle Milorganite. Reapplication is needed only after about six weeks but winter re-applications can wait for up to two months. The odor from the high hop residues from the many Milwaukee breweries make it a deterrent for deer since it masks the deer scent they would be following for their safety. Your lawn becomes a “no go” area for deer as their trails are severed or re-routed.
- 3. “PlotSaver” System from Messina Wildlife ([www.messinawildlife.com](http://www.messinawildlife.com)):** A version of the “PlotSaver” system offered by Messina Wildlife has been very effective in dissuading deer from our own garden. The “PlotSaver” system consists of a loosely woven plastic barrier ribbon available from Gateway, or online, that is strung from inexpensive plant stakes around the perimeter of your garden, or around individual beds. The tape is sprayed with “DeerStopper”, a relatively pleasantly scented deterrent spray (it contains rosemary oil), or with “Liquid Fence”. Adding a few twists to the ribbon causes it to flutter in the breeze unsettling deer even more. Keep an eye on the ribbon since it may be knocked down by fallen tree limbs. We use a two-tape barrier, the design of which is shown on the reverse, for our rear garden. We use the sprays also in the front garden, spraying the power pole and all trees and shrubs, even those that deer do not browse, at about 3’ from the ground – even our mailbox post! If your lot is surrounded by a three-rail fence spray the top rail. If you have evergreens (juniper, mahonia, spruce etc. in your front garden) then spray them also even if they are deer resistant. This pervasive distribution of scent keeps the deer at bay as they fear to tread in your “unsafe” garden! In addition to “ready to use” form, the sprays are also economically available as concentrates to be diluted for use in a 2-gallon pressure sprayer.

4. **Wireless Deer Fence ([www.wirelessdeerfence.com](http://www.wirelessdeerfence.com)):** Despite the name there is no physical fence involved in this approach. The system consists of individual electronic devices that stand about 18" tall. The base contains a couple of AA batteries plus some fancy electronics. The top of each device consists of a pair of crossed insulated wires forming a "cage" within which a fruit scented resin lure is inserted. Deer are attracted to the lure but, when they contact the wires of the "cage", they receive a *very low current harmless* 500-volt reminder that this garden is not for them! I have accidentally received this jolt myself and experienced no harm. This system is perhaps best deployed in your front garden where you would prefer not to have tape fences strung around. We use these "zappers" around the perimeter of the front garden spaced at about 15' and also near deer fodder such as daylilies. They are also useful as a back-up elsewhere should your tape barrier be compromised for any reason. The batteries last at least a year but the scented lures must be replaced once a month.

We continue to use all four of the above approaches because the combination is working very well for us and we are reluctant to experiment further by dropping one because of the potential plant loss and health problems that could result. You may well have discovered other approaches that work well for you. If so please share them with us and with all those who are tired of "catering" to deer!"

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**Figure 1: Design for a twin-tape deer fence using a tape barrier ribbon sprayed with DeerStopper**



**Notes:**

1. The design is based on the PlotSaver system recommended at [Deerstopper.com](http://Deerstopper.com) (Messina Wildlife)
2. The plant stakes are the (1/2" diam.) green ones with rough surfaces available at most garden centers. Special stakes with clips to hold the tape are available from Messina Wildlife but are more expensive.
3. The tape is DeerStopper "barrier tape" available at Gateway or on line.
4. The tapes must be taut between the stakes, not sagging.
5. It is helpful to twist the tape about ten times between each pair of stakes to produce motion in a breeze.
6. Use a magic marker on the stakes to mark the soil line (1' from the pointed end) and the location of each of the tape attachment points. Add a piece of duct-tape at the mark for the soil line to help you see when you reach the right depth (1').
7. String a long section of the tape, wrapping it at least twice around each stake. Heavy duty florist wire wrapped twice around the tape at the stakes and twisted *very tight* with pliers will keep the tape in place. TwistTies work too but are not as strong and will not last as long.
8. To provide a "gate" through the fence fashion a "hook" from the florist wire and make a loop, at one end of the tape, that can be removed from the hook – but remember to re-hang the tape afterward!
9. At corners use a second stake angled to prevent the corner stake from being pulled inward (join the stakes with twisted florist wire) or use a slotted wire-fence support post with a soil plate at the bottom.
10. The tape should be as continuous as your plantings allow and end, if possible, at a house corner or wall.
11. A single tape system can use shorter (4') stakes, with 9" below soil level and the tape 3' high. This is useful for temporarily surrounding small beds.