

# Voracious Beauty on the Hoof:

## The turf war between deer and trees

By Jane Coutts

The deer-proofing expert — a great, big, broad-shouldered man, with a voice to match — had two solutions for controlling deer damage to the trees at my cottage. Neither of them, to my mind, was what you could call helpful.

“LICENSE A HUNTING CLUB ON YOUR PROPERTY!” the expert bellowed. “THAT’LL CLEAR THEM OFF!” Well, it would, likely, but I couldn’t see my neighbours being too happy with it, since the property in question is rather less than an acre on South Portage Road. Assuming the club aimed so it wouldn’t hit any passing vehicles, it was almost bound to pepper one neighbour or the other’s place with buckshot.

Maybe not.

Suggestion #2? “CUT DOWN ALL THE TREES. PEOPLE WILL SCREAM LIKE HELL, BUT YOU WON’T SEE ANY MORE DEER.”

Well, you know, the man had a point. Except that presumably if my family had wanted Little House on the Prairie, we’d have built that sod hut by the slough several generations ago. Plus, thanks to the foresight of the planning committee and the Lake of Bays Association’s dedicated lobbying, you can’t raze the trees here even if you want to. And I don’t. The point is, I like my trees, and the deer are eating them.

Back, as they say, to the drawing board.

It’s some years since I read the statistic (probably more of an estimate, really, since wild animals are notoriously hard to count) that in the early 1980s there were 100,000 deer in Ontario, but that had increased to 300,000. Judging by what I see on the highways and by-ways of Lake of Bays, the population has kept growing apace. And they’re hungry. Very, very hungry.





Combine this burgeoning population, and its apparently insatiable appetite for tasty low-lying greenery, with the mature forest that surrounds the lake, and you might be excused for the feeling that Lake of Bays is moving into serious telephone-pole farming. Nothing, it sometimes seems, grows between the top of the raspberries and the maximum height a big deer can reach to nibble while standing on a snow bank. Some people call the cedars that have had their bottom branches chewed off “Muskoka palm trees”.

The question is, what’s to be done? What won’t deer munch?

Not a lot, is the unfortunate answer. “So, it’s going to be a short article?” says Bruce Campbell, of Lakeside Landscaping on Fox Point Road, when I tell him I’m writing about what trees I can plant that will fend off deer. He’s got little faith in the concept of deer-proofing.

“A lot of things work further south, where deer are an occasional problem,” he says. “But they just can’t hold their own up here.” Part of that is because a lot of people feed deer. “They are beautiful animals,” Campbell says, “it just they have such a voracious appetite.” (Incidentally, feeding deer inappropriate food, such as grains or grass, can actually hurt them: their stomachs are designed for twigs).

Feeding will likely increase assaults on your trees. It’s the old squirrel-in-the-birdfeeder problem. Try explaining to one animal it’s vermin when other people feed it and you feed other animals. If one property sets out food for deer, a cute-but-dumb critter is not going to know not to eat the greenery down the road.


In fact, these critters aren’t even following their own rules about what to eat. Their increasing population keeps driving deer to try new foods, a problem that’s made worse if we have a harsh winter.

“We’re finding more and more stuff each year they have a taste for that they didn’t the year before,” says Linda Keown of the Dwight Garden Centre, who admits it’s frustrating trying to supply plants in an area heavily populated by deer. Her focus is flowers, and she has to constantly modify the plants she offers as “deer-resistant.”

She’s a believer in the anti-deer sprays on the market, but they need regular applications to work and that’s a problem for cottagers who are often away. Her centre will do the spraying for a price. “At least it gives people a chance to see their annuals,” she says. Silver-leaved plants, such as dusty miller and lavender don’t seem to appeal, but flowers known as deer-resistant further south, such as shasta daisies and cranesbill geraniums, don’t stand a chance at Port Cunnington or Fox Point, Linda says.







She often recommends shrubs for gardens, because they're woodier and that tends to put deer off — unless, of course, they're very hungry. False spirea, yellow potentilla, barberry, junipers, smoke trees and red osier dogwood all have a fighting chance, she says. As for trees, Linda says, the best bet is to stick to some of the conifers. Deer don't much like spruce and won't eat white pine if they have an option.

Rebecca Krawczyk, owner of BarK Native Plant Nursery in Baysville, agrees evergreens are the best bet — with notable exceptions. Deer love cedar, hemlock and Canada yew, but they don't care for balsam fir or spruces and jack pine, white pine and tamaracks don't interest them much.

Maybe it's dessert, but deer have a clear preference for sweet trees — sugar maples, yellow birch and black cherries. They're less interested in white birch and red oak, but since they like acorns, oaks can attract them anyway. Red maple does better than sugar maple, and neither white nor black ash appeal. And, as the deer-proofing expert told me, they don't like basswood. But ants do, so don't plant it too close to the house.

Hobblebush, nannyberry and wild raisin are deer-resistant native shrubs Rebecca recommends. As an aside, she points out that the bubbler that keeps ice away from your dock and water intake will attract deer, because they like easy access to drinks (who doesn't?). Bubblers are very attractive to another tree adversary, beavers, who can slip down the lake from bubbler to bubbler, eating all the way.

It's important, Rebecca says, not to plant saplings, the preferred food of both beaver and deer. Deer love tender new growth, so anything small tends to be at risk. She finds a lot of people have luck with motion-activated sprinklers — when deer walk by, the sprinklers kick on and the deer flee. (Though Bruce Campbell tells the story of a garden protected well by sprinklers — until there was a thunderstorm. With all the noise and the rain pouring down, the deer didn't notice the sprinklers and stripped the garden bare before the last raindrop fell).

It's wise to plant things in groups, and planting a mix of species together (some less tasty for deer along with those that have more appeal), can help protect them all. Rebecca doesn't recommend planting fewer than three white birches, for example, and five is better.

“Plant them all, and pray, and whichever comes out on top comes out on top,” she says. “Oh, and have a sense of humour.”