

Deer

GWF242
Updated January 2009

These beautiful animals can cause serious damage to woodland, trees, crops and gardens. A range of measures can help protect your garden from their unwanted attentions.

Q How many species of deer are there?

A Six species of deer live wild in the UK now, with a total population of around one million. All the species are increasing in numbers and range and, as the population grows, so does their reputation as a pest and threat to the nation's gardens. The native roe deer, red deer and the introduced fallow deer can be found all over the UK in appropriate habitats. The Chinese muntjac deer is found mainly in the south and east of England, the Japanese sika deer is currently proliferating in Scotland, while the Chinese water deer is only found in small pockets, but is spreading in eastern England.

Q How do I recognise the different species?

A Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) are one of the largest deer, standing over 1.2m at the shoulder. They have a reddish-brown coat and the antlers are rounded or cylindrical in cross-section. Fallow deer (*Dama dama*) were introduced into the UK by the Normans; these traditional park deer are smaller than the red deer at 1m. They have a bright-chestnut coat with white spots in the summer. The coat can also be a creamy white colour or black.

Their antlers are palmate or flattened. The sika deer (*Cervus nippon*) is sometimes called the spotted deer. They were introduced into deer parks from Japan in the 1860s. Up to 85cm in height, they have bright brown coats and rounded antlers. Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) are a little smaller than sika deer, around 75cm tall. They have an attractive foxy-red summer coat, large ears and a thick neck. Their antlers have three tines on each side. The small muntjac deer (*Muntiacus reevesi*) is often mistaken for a medium-sized dog, and was introduced from China in the early 1900s. They are bright brown and up to 50cm tall with short, incurved antlers like a single spike or horn. The Chinese water deer (*Hydropotes inermis*) are about 60cm tall, with a brown coat and no antlers.

Q Where and when are deer most likely to be found?

A Deer mainly live in woodland areas but use farmland and gardens to find food. Gardeners may experience extensive damage as vegetables, soft fruit and flowering plants are very attractive food for deer. Late winter to spring is the peak period when deer visit gardens. While deer are traditionally perceived as shy animals, they are becoming bolder and can be found

browsing in your garden during daylight hours.

Q Why do deer come into gardens?

A In their natural habitat deer feed on foliage and shoots of shrubs and trees. If food is scarce in the winter, they may forage further afield. Deer only started entering our gardens relatively recently. As the deer population increases and the competition for territory becomes more intense, more deer are likely to find alternative stamping grounds. If they discover a food source, they are likely to return, adopting your garden as a feeding area.

Q Which garden plants do deer prefer to eat?

A Deer are unpredictable and opportunistic feeders. While they may feast on a plant in one garden, they may ignore the same plant in another. They can feed on a wide range of plants, including thorny ones, and seem to have a preference for plants with purple leaves. They are especially fond of evergreen azaleas, runner beans, beetroot, bluebell foliage, ceanothus, hardy geraniums, grape hyacinth, ivy, modern hybrid roses, pansies, *Sedum spectabile*, strawberry, *Viburnum tinus* and yew.

Q What other damage can deer cause in gardens?

A Red, sika and fallow deer peel and eat bark, favouring Norway spruce, lodgepole pine, larch, ash, willow and beech. Muntjac damage coppice shoots by nipping through the stem about one metre from the ground so it bends over. Deer rub their antlers against woody stems to remove the velvet from newly grown antlers and to mark out their territory. This is known as fraying. It may continue until late summer and causes strips of bark to peel off and side-shoots to break off in the process.

Q How do I recognise damage caused by deer?

A There are several clues showing that deer have been visiting your garden. A ragged end to a tree or plant shoot suggests deer or sheep grazing. The height of the browsing helps to identify the culprit and the species responsible. Deer browse from 90cm to 1.8m high and fray from 40cm to 1.8m high. When deer strip bark, because they have no upper incisor teeth, they leave broad teeth marks running up the peeled stem, with torn or broken bark hanging at the top. If you can distinguish them, deer droppings are short, cylindrical or almost spherical and often have a small point at one end. They have a smooth surface compared with rabbit or hare pellets and are black when fresh.

Q How can you deter deer from entering your garden?

A Effective deterrents include fencing, tree protection and more resistant or unattractive plants.

Repellents can be used on certain plants to help prevent

deer eating them. However, the effectiveness of repellents is reduced greatly by rain, and new growth requires additional applications. Other deterrents are unreliable; the use of ultrasound as a deterrent against deer has not been shown to be effective in our members' trials.

Adequate tree protection needs to be a minimum of 1.2m high for roe and muntjac deer and 1.8m for red, sika and fallow deer. Wire or plastic netting should be placed around each tree using stakes that are far enough from the tree to prevent deer damage. You can also use tree shelters, split plastic tubes, spiral guards and mesh guards to protect trunks or very young trees.

Q Tell me more about fencing.

A Fencing is the most effective solution to keeping deer out of your garden; unfortunately it is expensive and can be unsightly. Fences should be at least 2m high; increase this to 2.4m high for the taller red deer. Fences must be firmly secured along the ground. Typical fencing materials are wire mesh or panel fencing along the bottom, with wires at the top which should not be more than 30cm apart. Gardeners shouldn't use barbed wire. New lightweight materials such as high-tensile plastic netting, recycled plastic posts, metal box strainers and intermediate posts have reduced the costs of fencing and are suitable for temporary fencing. An electric fence is another idea. All these may provide short-term protection, but routine inspections are essential. Deer will only attempt to jump a fence if they are unable to pass through or under it. Digging a ditch on the far side of the fence will help to

deter them. Deer will be less inclined to jump over a barrier if they cannot see what is on the other side.

Q Are there any plants deer will avoid?

A No plants are completely deer-proof and most plants are vulnerable when young. In general most animals are discouraged by very aromatic plants, prickles and spines and tough, leathery leaves. The following plants are less palatable to deer.

Bulbs Narcissus, iris and lily

Herbaceous plants Achillea, alchemilla, aquilegia, begonia, clematis, columbine, delphinium, fuchsia, hellebore, hosta, larkspur, lupin, myosotis, papaver, primula and vinca

Shrubs Artemesia, azalea, bamboo, berberis, buddleja, camellia, chaenomeles, choisya, cistus, cornus, cotoneaster, cytiscus, daphne, deutzia, elaeagnus, erica, escallonia, euphorbia, forsythia, hebe, hydrangea, hypericum, jasminum, lavendula, lonicera, mahonia, paeonia, pelargonium, philadelphus, pieris, potentilla, rhododendron, ribes, rosmarinus, santolina, senecio, skimmia, spiraea, *Viburnum burkwoodi* and weigela

Useful organisations

The Deer Initiative
PO Box 2196, Wrexham
LL14 6YH 0870 774 3677
www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk

The Forestry Commission
National Office for England
Great Eastern House,
Tenison Road, Cambridge
CB1 2DU 01223 314546
www.forestry.gov.uk

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