

A Gardener's Notebook
Creating a Deer Resistant Garden with Shrubs
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Often the most difficult challenge facing garden designers in our area is finding deer resistant plants that also meet the basic needs of the site. Very few plants can be considered deer proof. When faced with starvation, deer will try out almost any plant. However, I have found that by using the list of rarely or seldom severely damaged plants developed by Rutgers Cooperative Extension, I can select plants that have the highest chance of resistance to deer grazing.

Some of my favorite deer resistant shrubs that do best in part shade are also evergreen and look good all year round. This includes Boxwood, Holly, Japanese Plum Yew, Leucothoe, Andromeda, Skimmia, Sweet Box, Daphne and Viburnum. The leaves on these plants are generally tough, leathery and some even have a disagreeable scent when crushed. All need very little maintenance to keep their shape.

Boxwood (Buxus) is a hearty staple of many gardens. It comes in a variety of heights from the low, rounded form of the **Green Gem** to the slightly pyramidal shape of the **Green Beauty** to the dark blue green leaves of **Vardar Valley** and the tall, wide form of the **American Boxwood**. Boxwood tend to be costly because they are slow growing. They are worth the extra cost because of their longevity and beauty.

The **Japanese Plum Yew** (Cephalotaxus harringtonia) is an often overlooked shrub. It is a unique evergreen that loves deep shade. Its dark green, short, stiff leaves resemble a yew but are extremely deer resistant. There are several varieties of plum yew. The tall, upright **Fastigata** makes a good hedge. Low and wide branching, **Nana** looks best when grouped beneath a tree.

There is a **Holly** to fit any garden design. These versatile plants can stand alone or can be clustered in groups as a hedge or wind break. Most well known of the upright, pyramidal shaped hollies are the *Ilex aquipernyi* and *attenuata*. Their unique pointy leaves and cherry red berries are festive against the winter snow. The leaves on **Japanese Hollies** (*Ilex crenata*) are oval shaped and have a lovely glossy appearance. They come in sizes to fit all gardens from the low growing **Helleri**, the rounded **Green Luster**, the pyramidal **Steeds** and the tall, thin **Sky Pencil**. **Inkberry Holly** (*Ilex glabra*) is a native holly with oval leaves and ink colored berries in autumn. *Meserveae* is a variety of Holly with bluish hued leaves and red or yellow berries. Varieties vary from a pyramidal shape to a low compact form and make great screening plants. The **American Holly** (*Ilex opaca*) can grow to a towering height of 45-50'. For the winter garden one cannot overlook **Winterberry Holly** (*Ilex verticillata*). Looking more like a low, wide branched, small tree throughout the summer, this shrub comes alive in winter with masses of red berries.

There are several deer resistant shrubs for a more natural or native garden. The long, drooping leaves of **Leucothoe** form a wide, arching form and look lovely on a slight slope. Japanese Andromeda (*Pieris japonica*) have a rounded form with leaves that look like the palm of a hand. In spring clusters of white to pink bell like flowers cover the shrub. **Sweet Box** (*Sarcococca hookeriana*), **Daphne** and **Skimmia** are dainty, low growing shrubs that do well in the front of a border. All have small white spring flowers that release a sweet scent.

There are many shrubs that enjoy sun and can tolerate deer as well. Just a few are Mahonia, Junipers, Forsythia, Spirea, Lilac and Weigela. **Mahonia** (*Mahonia aquifolium*) has a unique form that not all will appreciate. Long, leathery and pointy leaves seem to say "Stay Away", but its bright yellow spring flowers and dark blue summer berries give this shrub a special beauty.

Forsythia announces that springtime is here. It does best in full sun and when allowed plenty of room to fill out into its wild, arching form. Planted in a dense hedge, deer will alter their path to move around forsythia and are often frustrated in finding an entrance to the garden.

Spirea is a sun garden staple. Although it loses its leaves in winter, it rebounds early in spring with flowers and colorful leaves. From the dainty 12" high **Little Princess**, bright lime colored leaves of the 36" high **Lime-mound** to the tall, arching branches of **Bridalwreath** covered in masses of white blooms there is a spirea for any garden.

Although its blooms are short lived, everyone loves the scent of **Lilacs** (*Syringa*) in May. On the market today are more compact varieties such as **Miss Kim** that do well in small, suburban gardens. Lilac blooms come in a many colors from white to pink to purples and all are deer resistant. Plant in a well drained location with at least six hours of sun.

Weigela are rapidly becoming a favorite of the sun garden. The older varieties have arching branches that grace fences and garden walls. Newer cultivars such as **Wine and Roses** have gorgeous wine colored leaves all summer with hot pink, late spring flowers. They make a lovely backdrop for summer blooming perennials.

The best defense against the ever increasing deer population is an 8' high deer fence. However, there is hope for those who wish to create a lovely garden space that is deer resistant but cannot fence in the garden. The shrubs mentioned in this Gardener's Notebook all have met with good success against deer grazing. Selecting the right plant for the right space is key to a beautiful and long lasting garden.



Japanese Plum Yew (Above)



Miss Kim Lilacs (Above)



Little Princess Spirea (Above)



Mahonia (Above)
Helleri Holly (To The Left)

