Deer biology and behavior:

- Deer often feed late in the evening and very early in the morning, so you won’t always see them.
- They are a special problem in gardens next to woodlands that can provide cover during the day.
- The two most common deer in California are the mule deer and the blacktailed deer.
- Deer eat shrubs, vines, fruit and nut trees, garden vegetables, grasses, and small flowering plants.

Look for these signs to confirm deer damage:

- Hoofprints, 2 to 3 inches long, split in the middle, pointed at the front, and more rounded at the rear.
- Piles of small jellybean-shaped droppings.
- Trampled plants and shredded or ragged foliage, buds, or terminals.
- Girdled trunks or branches broken by deer rubbing against them with their antlers.

Be aware of legal restrictions.

- The California Fish and Game Code classifies deer as game animals. If deer are damaging your property or crops, you must get a permit to shoot them. Shooting, however, isn’t recommended around homes and gardens.
- For deer, traps and poisons are illegal and can’t be used.

Protect your garden with fences.

- A properly built and maintained fence 7 or 8 feet high is the most effective control method. Fence height may need to be extended for steep slopes.
- Most existing fences can be made deer-proof by extending them 3 or 4 feet with mesh or smooth wire. Be sure the fence is sturdy and fitted to the ground, so deer can’t crawl under it.
- Use wire or plastic plant protectors to shield individual plants.
- Standard electric fences haven’t proven very effective. The New Zealand type may be effective but should be professionally installed and constantly monitored.

Repellents and frightening devices:

- Chemical repellents that give off foul tastes or odors, such as the scent of a predator, can be useful in some situations.
- Repellents must be reapplied at frequent intervals, depending on what is used and the weather.
- Repellents may not work if preferred food sources for deer are available.
- Many repellents aren’t allowed on food crops or can damage some plants. Read the product label.
- Deer quickly adjust to most noisemaking devices such as propane cannons and electronic alarms, making them ineffective. However, new devices featuring deer distress sounds show promise.

Consider deer-resistant plants.

- There are plant species deer prefer not to eat, especially when other more palatable plants are available. However, when food is scarce, deer will eat most plants, including many deer-resistant species.
- Consult your local nursery and garden center, UC Cooperative Extension office, or UC Master Gardeners, or refer to gardening publications about deer-resistant plants suitable for your area.

See Pest Notes: Deer at ipm.ucanr.edu for more details.

Minimize the use of pesticides that pollute our waterways. Use nonchemical alternatives or less toxic pesticide products whenever possible. Read product labels carefully and follow instructions on proper use, storage, and disposal.

What you use in your landscape affects our rivers and oceans!