

Deterring Deer

Protecting clients' plants from deer damage is a potential profit center for landscape and lawn care companies.



Many landscape professionals have heard an earful or two from clients who've experienced deer damage on their properties. White-tailed deer, found in nearly every state in the United States, and mule deer, common throughout the western U.S. and Canada, can wreak havoc on perennial gardens in the spring and ornamental trees and shrubs in the fall and winter.

In regions with a lot of deer pressure, landscape professionals typically do their best to avoid installing deer-attracting plants like rhododendrons, yews and arborvitae, but many find their do-not-plant lists are as variable as the weather. Severe drought and extensive hard-packed snow coverage are two factors that can cause deer to feed aggressively, moving to plants they wouldn't otherwise touch or going to greater lengths to access food sources.

These variables and the fact that deer pressure appears to be increasing in many regions as development contin-

DEER FACTS

- **TYPES AND RANGE** – Deer are one of the most widely distributed mammals in North America. The white-tailed deer is found in just about every state except Alaska and Utah. The mule deer is primarily a western species; the black-tailed deer is a subspecies of the mule deer.
- **HABITAT** – Deer live in the forest edge. They thrive in agricultural areas interspersed with woodlots and riparian habitats. They favor early successional stages which keep brush and sapling browse within reach. Dense cover is used for winter shelter and protection.
- **FOOD HABITS** – Leaves, stems and buds of woody plants are a staple food for deer. Preferred plant species vary considerably in quality and regional availability. Nutrient requirements and the amount of food consumed vary with age of the animal, season and the reproductive cycle, but daily dry matter consumption averages 2 percent to 4 percent of live body weight. For adult bucks, daily consumption is greatest in spring and averages 4.4 to 6.4 pounds of air-dry food per day. Consumption is about half that during winter. For does, greatest daily food consumption occurs in early fall, just prior to the breeding season.

Source: Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management (<http://icwdm.org/handbook/mammals/Deer.asp>)

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ues, mean landscape customers are looking for reliable solutions to keep deer from damaging their properties.

In response, landscape firms seeking additional revenue may want to consider adding some type of deer control program to their service mix.

There are generally two ways companies add deer control – by repelling them with spray applications or excluding them with fence installations.

“Deer control is a multi-faceted service,” says Guy Keon, managing



While deer fencing is one of the most effective methods for keeping deer at bay, many property owners hesitate to install fencing for aesthetic reasons. Installers say there are some “virtually invisible” options on the market. Photo: Benners Gardens

partner of Deer Fencers, an installation firm based in Phoenixville, Pa.

“It’s a good way to drive additional

revenue; plus it’s good for building overall customer relationships.”

Deer Fencers, sister company to fencing supplier Benners Gardens, installs between 150 to 250 deer fences annually with its own crews in Philadelphia and Connecticut and through its satellite partners along the East Coast, some of which are landscape companies.

Andy Felix, president of Tree-Tech in Foxboro, Mass., sought to emphasize his company’s expertise in protecting plants when he added a deer control spray service to his \$7.5 million firm’s

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mix. "Being arborists, we specialize in the care of trees and shrubs," he says. "Since a number of our clients were having problems with deer damaging their plants, I thought 'This has to become a part of what we do.'"

Tree-Tech began offering deer control two years ago. Despite slow growth due to two seasons of minimal deer damage, Felix is convinced deer control is a good fit for his firm and a potential revenue stream for any company that takes care of landscapes. Not only does it show a commitment to protecting clients' outdoor investments, deer control generally doesn't require any major new equipment.

plied directly to the plant. They repel by taste and are most effective when applied to trees and shrubs during the dormant season, which is one of the reasons this product was attractive to Felix. "I thought a push to our clients in areas with deer issues would help keep my spray equipment going later into the season," he says.

Also, firms adding deer applications don't need large-scale equipment; backpack sprayers will do, Felix says. "The great thing is you only need to spray six feet high and under – that's as high as they can graze."

In terms of repellent product choice, there's a wide variety on the market. Felix has tested several, but

cide he uses: "It leaves an orange-colored residual on the leaves." Though some clients have hesitations about the color, Felix sees it as an opportunity to educate clients on the safety of the applications. "It's usually not a stumbling block to a sale," he says. "It also allows the client to see that we've made an application – there truly is material on the plants."

Because reapplication may be necessary in the winter or early spring, pricing can be tricky. Tree Tech's deer control applications start at \$200, and go up depending on the amount of deer-susceptible plants on a property. When pricing, it's always best to visit a property, Felix says.

"We specialize in the care of trees and shrubs. Since a number of our clients were having problems with deer damaging their plants, I thought 'This has to become a part of what we do.'" — Andy Felix, Tree-Tech

SPRAY APPLICATIONS. Lawn care or tree care companies likely already own the spray equipment required for repellent applications, Felix says, adding that's one of the reasons he pursued this service. Plus, "It's a good opportunity to get on a property and see a client you may not have otherwise seen," Felix says. "You can sell winter work and it's a good add-on service, especially if you're in the business of protecting their plants."

There are generally two types of repellents, according to the non-profit Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management (ICWDM). Area repellents are applied around the plants (often in perimeter applications) and repel deer by odor alone. Contact repellents, the second type, are ap-

settled on a combination fungicide-antidesiccant material. "Together they offer good protection that we felt would last throughout the winter," he says, adding he hesitates to call the service a complete success at this point, as low deer pressure the past two seasons hasn't translated into enough applications to properly gauge effectiveness. "There hasn't been that much injury from deer as there has been in the past, so the jury's still out." According to ICWDM, repellents' effectiveness often depends on rainfall, as they don't withstand the elements well, though in some cases they can be combined with products to improve their weatherability.

Felix notes another drawback of some repellents, including the fungi-

"You have to get a good look at the type of plants they have, plus you may notice others sales opportunities," he says.

FENCING INSTALLATION. There are a number of fencing options for controlling deer, including temporary and permanent electric fences, but the most common deer fences for residential and commercial landscapes are permanent woven wire or plastic fences. Though experts say they're the most reliable and effective way to manage deer damage, they have some drawbacks and aren't right for every client.

For example, many homeowners experience deer damage in their front foundation plantings. Not only do cus-

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tomers balk at installing permanent fencing in this area, local codes often restrict fence heights. The standard height for deer fences is 7 to 8 feet. "The main drawback is that consumers think of typical deer fences as a utilitarian-looking product," he says of the woven wire or plastic fences. Another consideration is cost. Depending on property scale and type of system, permanent deer fencing installations range between \$1,500 and \$50,000, Keon says.

Because of the issues with permanent deer fences, Keon has seen an interest in temporary, winter-only fences. "During the winter, people aren't are as concerned about the overall look of their property," he

says. They're more open to the idea of a temporary fence that's installed in the fall, taken down in the spring and stored off-site by the contractor during the rest of the year. The benefit to the contractor is temporary fences provide a recurring-revenue stream.

Prices for temporary fences depend on property size and the service options, Keon says. He estimates the materials cost about \$4 per linear foot and that installation usually figures to three-quarters the cost of materials.

Like deer spray services, one of the greatest attributes of a deer fence installation business is it requires little start-up investment, Keon says. A typical deer fence for a residential or commercial application is installed

using only hand tools. Larger commercial or agricultural deer fences may require basic landscape installation equipment such as a skid-steer loader, but that's generally not the market landscape contractors who do fencing target, Keon says.

Installation crews typically consist of two or three men. "A two- or three-man crew should be able to knock our a one-acre project in two to three days," Keon says. As deer fence installation is typically a "light" side service for green industry firms, Keon says landscape contractors generally appoint and train one lead foreman. After that, the balance of the labor generally floats from other available installation crewmembers. **LL**



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