

## Session A3: Landscaping with Deer

by Kathleen Salisbury

\*Please refer to Ms. Salisbury's presentation for more detailed information

Ms. Salisbury opened the session by asking if anyone had a positive deer interaction story to share. There being none, she noted that we generally consider ourselves the "victim" when it comes to deer interactions. She posited that when we do so, we are not telling the entire story because humans are not acknowledging that we are a part of the problem. She emphasized that the title of her presentation is landscaping *with* deer since they are now a part of our urban/suburban world.

It is helpful to understand the basics of deer biology in order to define landscaping strategies, and clips from "The Private Life of Deer" were used to illustrate points such as their preference for edge habitat, their typical range of about a 1 square mile area, a tendency to forage at dusk and dawn, that they have no natural predators (vehicles and hunters being their biggest threats) and have adapted to a nearly unlimited food source found in our residential landscapes, and that they are a keystone species, having far-reaching impacts on the ecosystem. Our landscapes are the perfect habitat for deer, providing more food to eat during the winter and a greater year-round food source than typically found in the wild. The production of twins and even triplets has become commonplace due to the availability of a reliable food source. An unmanaged deer population can double in 3-5 years.

### Preferences and Patterns

Deer-proof plants don't exist. Deer are opportunists and are known to eat more than 500 species of plants, although some are found more palatable than others. They selectively browse when there are a large variety of plants available, and are more damaging when there is less variety to choose from. Deer eat more in human landscapes if there is less availability in natural areas and tend to feel safe in the landscapes we've created. They travel in predictable patterns and are also adaptable to patterns, such as when dogs are let outside. Deer consume approximately 3 percent of their body weight each day foraging on the buds, flowers and leaves of plants. They also get their water intake from plant material.

### Strategies

When considering strategies, first think about how your actions will affect the world around you; consider the bigger picture. Deer fencing can be effective, but it is not solving the core problem of deer population. Standard deer fencing is 8 feet tall, although there are other options, such as shorter, double fences, electric fences and angled fences. Many repellents involving taste, odor, pain and fear have been studied with mixed results for effectiveness. Alternating the use of more than one kind of repellent works best, as do

products with a rotten egg smell. Barrier ribbons alone or treated with repellent can work by deterring deer and directing their movements. Sachets of Milorganite have been found to be fairly effective. Deer don't have good eyesight, but do have good hearing and sense of smell, so strategies that take advantage of these conditions may be more successful.

### **Plant Selection and Placement**

Deer-resistant plant lists serve only a guideline. In general, deer avoid plants with strong odors, fuzzy or prickly leaves, milky sap, and bitter or alkaloid taste. Deer that are hungry in early spring or young deer will try anything; they get more selective later in summer. Plants need the most protection in early spring and in the fall. Also need to protect trees 6 inches or less in diameter from bark rubs from September through November along determined paths. Bullseye landscaping, where plants requiring greater protection are planted in closer proximity to the house, may help, as may creating more edges and vertical layers in other areas of the yard to serve as corridors to help direct deer travel. One final point: the plants we choose to landscape with can significantly impact the environment around us. There are plenty of examples of 'deer resistant' plants having escaped into the ecosystem (such as barberry); they persist and proliferate because deer don't eat them in the wild just as they don't eat them in our landscapes. It is essential to choose plants wisely and not compound harms to the environment.