

Deer-Proof Plants

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Many San Antonio neighborhoods have deer. Depending on your attitude, they are a blessing or a curse. Their presence means, at very least, that you must be selective in what you plant or have a six-foot fence. Producing a deer-proof list is not easy. Deer in each neighborhood have different preferences, and during a severe drought, all bets are off!

A list like this is most useful if you compare it to the reality of your neighborhood. If the listed plants are visible and prospering in your neighborhood, it is a confirmation that the plants belong on your list. If they aren't obvious, you may have a deer herd that eats them, or they just haven't been planted. If a plant on the list is questionable for your neighborhood, experiment with one or a few plants before investing in a whole planting.

Even for proven deer-proof plants, it is recommended that a new planting be sprayed with Liquid Fence or a similar product to discourage the curious deer from tasting or just yanking the plants because they are new. Spray once per week for 3 weeks.

Shade Trees- As far as I can tell, all shade trees are under threat to be eaten or "rubbed" by deer. That means that a new shade tree must be protected by 6-foot-tall, 6 feet in diameter fence until the crown grows out of reach and the cork bark layer develops. For trees like red oaks, this may be six or more years. Make sure the fence is held up and away from the tree by 3 sturdy fence posts.

Small Trees- Mexican plum, brazil (condalia), vitex, and huisache. Texas persimmon appears on some lists. Deer may not eat the foliage, but for sure, the deer like the fruit.

Large Shrubs- Texas mountain laurel and standard yaupon are the classic large shrubs for deer country, but pomegranate, standard pittosporum, and rusty haw viburnum often are also passed up by the deer. The oleanders and primrose jasmine are never eaten. Primrose jasmine will grow in sun or shade.

Woody Shrubs- nandina, Sandankwa viburnum, dwarf yaupon, Carolina jessamine, rosemary, Mexican honeysuckle, oregano.

Groundcovers - "New Gold" lantana freezes back every winter, lavender lantana often blooms into a mild winter and spreading rosemary is evergreen. It is especially attractive on retaining walls. Dwarf Mexican petunia often is eaten in a drought but may survive in normal rainfall years.

Perennials - salvia, lantana, iris, four o'clock, paperwhites, mint marigold. Plumbago appears on some deer-proof lists but it is eaten in my neighborhood. Turk's cap and shrimp plant are favorite hummingbird plants for the shade. Deer often let them be, except in droughts.

Root-hardy Blooming Shrubs- This category includes some of the tall semi-tropical bloomers such as esperanza and thyralis. In some neighborhoods the deer will pass up poinciana and firebush. Even if the deer eat them in a drought, they would probably survive over the long-term.

Annuals- Vinca is the most reliable deer-proof annual flower. In many situations deer pass up zinnias and snapdragons. Both plants, however, are susceptible to breakage when the deer move through plantings.

Misc.- lawn grass, cactus, yucca, bamboo, ornamental grass. The deer do not eat the foliage of red yucca, but they will eat the blooms. Deer are browsers rather than grazers, they prefer stems and broadleaf plants to grass. When you see deer eating the lawn, it is usually horse herb or some other weed rather than the grass blades that they are eating.