

Oh, Dear, Oh Deer!

By Mark Gilliland for the Hudson Independent

This winter with the extensive snow cover and increased deer populations, winter plant browse damage is significant. Even with an application or two of Bobbex (a spray-on repellent useful at lower temperatures due to having both a scent and a taste component), the feeding continues. Perhaps the only way to "totally protect" your garden is by fencing the beds and/or individual plants. If you have extensive landscaping, fencing the entire yard (with 8' deer fence) may be necessary. And costly!

A truly sustainable landscape design philosophy would acknowledge our current reality and simply let the deer roam, planting stuff they don't like. This strategy works for awhile, but each new generation acquires the taste for something unexpected. A plant never touched becomes this year's new salad making. I have seen this with iris, hyacinths, forsythia and many other plants over the last few years as deer population densities increase unchecked. (It seems that deer do not read the nursery labels or pay attention to the "deer resistant" plant lists from Cornell or Rutgers...)

The deer over-browse is creating a woodlands catastrophe in slow-motion: native wild flowers, spring ephemerals especially, many native shrub and tree seedlings are being chewed into possible extermination. Woods in Westchester typically now have no undergrowth or leaves from the 5 foot browse line down to ground level. Recent forestry studies show that our urban forests are growing older - demographically speaking, reaching "middle age" - yet no new growth (replacement seedling generations younger than 25 years old) can be found. Everything has been eaten. Luckily, however, field experiments show that by exclusion (fencing off acreage from deer browse), the seed "library" which still exists in the soil can sprout, thus allowing recovery and forest re-growth to begin again. That's great news if deer populations can be reduced significantly to

natural "carrying capacity" (fewer than 15-20 deer per square mile) of the woodland environment.

There have been attempts at the municipal level to take action to reduce deer populations – such as by seasonal bow hunting. In most every case, such plans have been abandoned due to public outcry. Taking action within the limits of a single municipality won't be effective in any case – deer populations will be quickly renewed by overflow from nearby territories. Thus, a wide-ranging regional solution is required.

Beyond the question of what to do about Bambi, we need to acknowledge the years of infestation of our woodlands by invasive species (many of which are not deer food.) Thus, invasive removal and control is another important component for healthy forest re-growth.

Finally, the Northeast woodlands have been silently invaded by Asian earthworms. These critters have a voracious appetite for forest leaf litter. In their wake, they leave large deposits of castings (worm poop) which chemically change the acidity /pH of the soil. This change in the top layer of the woodland duff is less conducive to native species re-growth, and more conducive to many invasive species. Studies are needed to figure out what percentage of the loss of undergrowth recovery is due to the deer and what percentage is due to the worms.

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