

Tales from My Fifteen-Year Battle with Deer

by Russ Allen

Depending on one's location, deer damage can be one of the most frustrating dilemmas for a daylily lover. In hopes of reducing this frustration, I will share my experiences over the past fifteen years with this pesky herbivore.

Deer Repellent Sprays and Odor Products

When I established my first daylily bed, I had forty cultivars in an area near my house in the backyard, and it wasn't long before I noticed deer damage to buds. My original approach was to purchase deer repellent sprays. I thought I had a great strategy in simply spraying the buds on the scapes around the outside of the daylily bed since only these buds appeared to be sampled as deer passed through our yard on the way to the nearby lake. This had reasonably good initial success, particularly during a year when the deer population was low. I'd spot a bud or two half-eaten and then clearly the deer moved on to greener pastures. The deer never seemed to bother eating the leaves, so I focused only on spraying the buds on the outer clumps on a weekly basis from late June through August.

My strategy was the "Quick Response" plan – namely to check each morning for deer damage, and the moment I spotted one eaten bud I'd nuke the others in the area with a deer repellent spray such as Deer Solution or Bobex. In my experience, you want something that tastes absolutely dreadful and doesn't only use odor to discourage animals. I heard somewhere that deer typically do a sampling run, eating a little bit of a wide variety of plants before coming back the next evening and having a full course daylily dinner. As noted below, this initially worked quite well and for a small daylily garden could be a promising approach.

Let me share a story to illustrate. After diligently spraying the outer clumps of my three gardens near the road, I went out to check my flowers the next morning.

I noticed that the very first bud of the first scape of the first clump along the path deer normally took to the lake was eaten at which point the deer clearly said "disgusting". The deer then moved on to the first bud of the first scape of the first clump of the second garden and probably exclaimed "rats!" Then he moved on to the first bud of the first scape of the third garden and evidently was pissed off, because he promptly went to my nextdoor neighbor's home and ate all his Hosta to the ground, as I discovered later that day.



One of the many deer sprays



First bud eaten on the first clump!

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Unfortunately, some wise guy deer and his siblings didn't get the notice and decided to go into the center of my daylily bed to see if things tasted better there. Those industrious rascals had a field day munching to their hearts' content, which led me to get really chapped off. Scratch that strategy – unless I was willing to spray all the buds in what had grown to be daylily beds of about 120 clumps each. No thanks.

Next, I tried to supplement the spraying of buds with items promising to have odors that discouraged deer. I tried using Milorganite, which was supposed to help but I couldn't note any difference. I tried various other products claiming odor prevention (including coyote urine) and have concluded that these only discourage deer that aren't very hungry. Basically, the deer figured they'd just hold their breath and munch a few dozen buds before moving on to nicer-smelling gardens.

Then, I read about stringing a nylon largely invisible fishing line around a garden which was supposed to disturb deer who can't stand bumping into a largely invisible line in the dark when they are on their way to dinner. At first, I thought this was helping until I noted that pretty much any time at all the poles holding the fishing line would get knocked over or the fishing line would be broken which kind of blew that approach out of the water.

Outdoor Dogs & Nature

The best approach I was told was to have an outside dog during the summer, as deer don't enjoy being chased and barked at while they're sneaking around trying to eat daylilies. We have allergies in my family that prevent pursuing this promising option, and, unfortunately, I haven't been able to find someone willing to offer a summer rent-a-dog service to homeowners. Of course, taking care of the dog would likely be more demanding than even spraying all the buds on 200 daylily clumps.

One particular fact hindered my recognition of the problems inherent to deer repellents: the cycle of the deer population. I understand that their main food source during the winter is acorns and that acorn trees have something like a three-year boom to bust cycle. When there is a bumper acorn crop, the following year there is a major jump in deer population, with more baby deer being born and surviving. After the deer population has swollen dramatically, the acorn trees hit a bust year, and all the deer are starving both during the winter and into spring, at which time the deer will pretty much eat anything, regardless of how it smells or tastes. They'll even eat rhododendron, which are poisonous, as well as other poisonous plants. They'll dig up and eat the roots of daylilies when hungry enough! Basically, your deer-repellent strategy may work great one year, but could be a disaster the next – probably related to this deer population boom to bust cycle and the harshness of the winter.

Polypropylene Deer Fence

Once I began hybridizing daylilies and noticed deer eating buds off the seedlings I'd waited two long years to see open, I'd had it! I took the plunge to install a deer fence around the side gardens where it would be most practical. I ordered a 7.5-foot deer fence kit online from DeerBusters.com. The site offers a wide range of deer and animal fencing products – such as nine-foot fence poles, polypropylene fencing, ground stakes, pole caps, warning banners, fence ties, and bottom securing stakes among other items. Note: a guest speaker from Tennessee indicated that deer jumped his ten-foot fence, but, fortunately, our local deer aren't so athletically inclined – yet. After measuring the linear distance around my target gardens, I ordered the 330' standard strength fencing package. Once this arrived, I arranged for our local handyman to install it as this was clearly more challenging than I ever imagined. One needs not only a sledge hammer to pound the bases for the poles into the rocky New England ground, but he or she must insert every pole perfectly straight, otherwise their fence leans like a drunken sailor.

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Then one must attach the polypropylene fence mesh to the poles with a gizmo that makes this much easier than doing it by hand. My fencing was the standard midweight polypropylene with a 600-pound break-strength per square foot. I designed the two sides of my fenced in gardens to be able to roll back so as to allow a truck carrying mulch to drive through and to provide open access to the sides of the bed next to the road and our house for both myself and (non-hoofed) garden visitors. The remaining two sides of the fence are permanently affixed to the ground with metal stakes. The openings where I “roll back” the fence have eighteen bungee cords to connect these twelve-foot sections of fencing with the nearest metal pole.



7 ½' Polypropylene Deer Fence

Hallelujah! Once the deer fence was up there was no more need for spraying buds and praying that the deer weren't so hungry as to ignore the rotten taste. Things went smoothly for the first couple years, although I did notice that critters (I'm told most likely rabbits) kept gnawing perfectly square holes in the polypropylene fence at various locations around the enclosed garden. Frankly, the rabbits didn't bother me at all since it appeared the only plants they were eating were the weeds in my daylily garden. What a deal! But after a couple years something very strange began occurring in the early summer: I'd walk around inside the fenced garden and notice buds being eaten again! What the heck? I scratched my head and thought that perhaps I had left the entrance to the fence open one evening by mistake so chalked it up to my error.

But then the browsing happened again, and worse. So I carefully inspected the fencing and noticed that in a couple locations the square holes the rabbits had chewed through the bottom of the fence had cut the sections of fence which were fixed to the ground and clearly some baby deer had nosed their way under the fence for a snack.



Dastardly devious baby deer

Naturally, we first went around patching the rabbit holes in the fence, assuming that would fix the problem. Unfortunately, after an area was patched, lo and behold a couple days later a new hole would appear a couple feet away from the original. Also, once a baby deer decides on its favorite garden restaurant, it's hard to change their culinary habits. They kept testing the perimeter of the fence until they found an area where they could sneak under. After considerable consternation, I finally opted to purchase four-foot high metal rabbit fencing to run this along the outside of the fence. I'd stop rabbits from eating new holes in the fence which enabled deer to wriggle their noses under the fence. In order to stop the rabbits from chewing more holes in the portions of the fence which were rolled back for entrance and exit to the garden, I decided to cut a “courtesy entrance” hole in the metal rabbit fence big enough for the rabbits to run through – and to my pleasant surprise this worked! The rabbits stopped chewing more holes in my fence.



**Hole cut in rabbit fence
(white board added for visibility)**

By this time, thanks to hurricane velocity winds that downed some major trees, I was able to expand my fenced in garden to about 250 cultivars. I'd check the garden every day, and deer damage appeared to be a thing of the past. That, of course, assumed that after visiting the garden I always remembered to close the fence entrance! After a couple bad experiences with what surely were full grown deer going through my open fence during the night, I finally decided enough was enough! I looked on the internet to see if I could supplement my deer fence with additional deterrents.

Ultrasonic Animal Repelling Devices

What I ultimately decided to try were high end ultrasonic deer repelling devices (not the cheap ones). Maybe these would provide protection on the rare nights I accidentally left my deer fence open. I purchased two different units online from Aspectek for about \$40 each, and they appeared to have promising features. They offered variable frequency sounds, making it less likely animals, including deer, would get used to any particular sound. They offered some noise options (up to almost a burglar alarm) and flashing light options as well. And they also offered different activation modes including both an "instant" activation when movement is detected within forty-five feet of the device, and a continuous setting which turned the device on and off at random intervals not more than every forty seconds when on AC current.

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The devices could operate on battery power or be plugged into an electrical extension cord, and I tried using "C" size batteries to start. I opted to set my ultrasonic devices on the "continuous" setting in the belief that this should discourage deer from wandering anywhere near my yard.



Ultrasonic Deer Repelling Devices

Things seemed to be going along smoothly until one day I again forgot to close my fence opening. What appears to have happened is that several large deer (or possibly a bear) entered the garden through the open fence when the ultrasonic device was between cycles, and once the device turned on the deer went berserk trying to get out of the fenced garden. Several attempts at ramming the fence as far away from the ultrasonic device as possible were evident, until finally they managed to smash through a corner of the fence, ripping the deer fence to the ground and bending the metal rabbit fence as well! Strangely enough, this disaster convinced me that the ultrasonic device worked great! I did conclude, however, that providing deer a forty-second window to eat my daylilies before being repelled wasn't such a great idea: I would need to have an ultrasonic device on the "instant" setting to hopefully stop the varmints before entering my garden.



Broken deer fence

After repairing the fence, which took some effort, things seemed to be quiet again until I noticed buds being eaten in the garden near our house. I'd thought the area would be protected by the ultrasonic device, and decided to check the batteries. Unsurprisingly, they'd died and would require more frequent changing, particularly with the device on the "continuous" setting.

Electric Baited Fence

Finally, I tried installing an electrified line around the garden near our home where a fence is impractical. This involved a controller plugged into an extension cord to provide pulsating electrical current along a wire held up on four-foot plastic poles. These had aluminum and cotton scent pods attached to each pole. Note: the pulsating DC current means there is no danger of electrocution, but you or an unwanted visitor may get a nasty shock. The scent is supposed to be irresistible to deer, who touch it with their tongues and get a jolt that will send them out of the neighborhood in a jiffy. This appeared to be a promising approach for a garden where spraying all the buds every week is not an appealing option, however; I noted that the moment an animal freaks out after getting shocked and tramples a plastic pole, the electric line shorts out on the ground and the protection vanishes. If you check your garden every single day, this approach could still be quite promising, but if not, you're taking a bit of a risk on the deer behaving as intended.

And of course, the deer that got shocked doesn't always communicate well with the other members of his family, so they may each take turns knocking down your fence after getting shocked!

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Parting Advice for those Seeking to Repel Deer

Based on my fifteen years of battling deer in Connecticut, here are my personal tips:

For small gardens or areas where deer fencing or electric fencing is impractical, spraying only the buds with a nasty-tasting repellent on a weekly basis from late June through August could work. I recommend this to folks with relatively few daylilies. Rotating the spray selected should also be considered. Please note that should any damage be noted, one should immediately do an extra round of bud spraying.

For larger gardens where fencing is impractical or undesirable, consider purchasing ultrasonic deer repelling devices. I strongly recommend units costing around \$40, and encourage two units for each garden. One unit should be set to "instant" activation, and the other to "continuous" to optimize effectiveness. If at all possible, run an extension cord to power the units, while also installing batteries in case of power outages. The devices can be brought inside during the off-season.

For large gardens where polypropylene fencing is an option, I'd recommend a professionally installed kit from DeerBuster.com. If you note any rabbit hole damage in the bottom of the fencing, the addition of a metal rabbit fence along the perimeter helps. And, for anyone out there who can be a tad forgetful at times, particularly when distracted by beautiful daylilies, the addition of an ultrasonic device is suggested for the odd night your fence gets left open!



Success! No Deer Damage!