

Prevent Wildlife Damage to Landscape

by James A. Fizzell, Sr. Ext. Adviser, Horticulture

Even though most of the Greater Chicago area is heavily urbanized, it is also home to a large population of wildlife. According to James A. Fizzell, University of Illinois Horticulturist in Cook County, the populations of rabbits, mice and especially deer may be higher now than they have ever been. When snow has covered the natural browse, these animals are forced to feed on trees and shrubs, often on prized landscape plants.

There are several ways to protect your plants from these animals. Mice take up residence in snow or debris near the bases of trees and shrubs, gnawing away the bark all winter, girdling the plants. Fruit trees, pines, and shrubs such as rose tree of China or flowering almond are most attractive. The mice will build a tunnel system under the snow from plant to plant so they can move and feed, safe from predators. Remove debris around the bases of the plants and walk down the snow so the mice can't tunnel up to the plants.

Rabbits, too, will resort to eating bark when snow covers their normal forage. They may girdle trees, but normally eat only the ends of branches of shrubs. This "haircut" usually does no permanent damage. Preferred are roses, fruit trees and young plants with thin bark.

Mechanical protection for trunk of young trees is effective. Use cylinders of hardware cloth at least 1½ feet taller than the expected snow cover. Commercially available rabbit guards of plastic, aluminum, etc., work well, too.

Protect beds of roses or finite areas of small trees using fencing 3 feet high, with the bottom six inches bent outward and an inch or so below the ground to prevent burrowing.

Keep snow at least 1½ feet below the fence or tree guards, or rabbits will get over them.

Deer populations are very high throughout the urban area. They have become accustomed to humans. They fearlessly feed on landscape plants even in densely populated areas anywhere near forest preserves, rivers, streams or other natural areas where they can hide during the day.

Once snow covers the grass, the deer feed on evergreens, and deciduous trees and shrubs, often removing everything from ground level to as high as they can reach.

This is especially damaging to evergreen hedges and foundation plantings which may not grow back once all foliage is removed, and to dwarf fruit trees destroying the reachable fruiting branches.

Deer may be repelled by using bars of fragrant soap tied to four-foot laths driven into the ground every 10-15 feet. If the deer are not wary of humans, this may not work. Spraying plants with rabbit/deer repellent containing thiram will usually prevent feeding by deer and rabbits. The material needs to be re-applied every month or so as it washes off.

Small areas may be fenced for seasonal deer protection. Fences must be placed so that there is insufficient take-off or landing room or the deer will jump them. Snow fence may work in such cases. Large areas can be protected with electric fence where legal. Plans for such installation are available and must be followed carefully.

The over abundance of wildlife is due to the succession of mild winters experienced in the 80's, and the lack of natural culling by starvation and by predators. Unless natural controls reduce their numbers, wild animals will continue to damage unprotected landscape plants.

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