

Deer Lessons Learned

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This winter I learned, after nine years of gardening in a deer presence, you should probably think twice and ask further advice before going up against Mother Nature. I've used Liquid Fence® successfully for at least seven years, failing only once with a rhododendron when I didn't spray the entire plant—only the buds. Lesson learned.

This year I went confidently into winter despite living right next to the Shenandoah National Park, continuing my spraying program with Liquid Fence®. The weather had been warm right into Thanksgiving week and then suddenly dipped to 25° F two nights in a row. I thought nothing of it, instead thinking only of my pure happiness at having one of my sons and his son visit during the holiday week.

I decided that it was getting pretty expensive spraying Liquid Fence® due to the size of the ever-expanding garden, so I invited a number of hunters in to harvest a few deer, thinking that would take some pressure off the garden. What was I? Crazy? I completely forgot that upsetting the balance of the herd would only invite in new diners to take their place!

The weather warmed back up to the 40s and occasionally low 50s into December and it became time to spray the garden again. The main garden stretches 400 feet along the driveway and is on the edge of a wooded ridge and fortunately gets morning sun. My pride and joy—the shaded garden—is full of azaleas, rhododendron, sarcococcas, hydrangeas, Lenten Roses, trillium, ferns, and all manner of other shade-loving plants. The foundation background of it all is many types of aucubas, probably 13 in all.

I sprayed December 18, and the next night the deer attacked nearly the entire garden. However, they strangely neglected azaleas. Aucubas were denuded of every single leaf and a few stems were whacked off. *Loropetalum* was eaten by half. No deer ever went near the scratchy leaves so I never bothered to spray it. All this spring's candytuft was eaten to the ground along with any remaining rudbeckias. Hydrangeas were whacked in half. Young long-needle pines were eaten to the trunk. A huge 12-foot-tall *Cryptomeria* 'Yoshino' was eaten from head height to the ground! It looked like a war zone.

The pride of my gardens were five 5-foot tall *Euonymus* 'Green Spire' that I had carefully protected against scale for five years. Now they were denuded and eaten down to two to three feet tall.

Completely bewildered, angry, furious, and confused, I called the Liquid Fence® Company and for two weeks tried to understand how this could have happened.

Two things happened. The deer that were used to my garden—two huge does—were now gone, and their progeny were here along with several new members of the herd. The herd grew in the garden from four to 20 almost overnight.

The second, and most important thing that I finally pieced together with the representative from Liquid Fence®, was that when the temperature dipped to 25° F the bottle of concentrated Liquid Fence® was in the unheated mudroom along with the cats' water and food dishes. I remembered that the water froze in the cats' dish and it clicked in that, according to the representative, the concentrate had been compromised by the cold temperature.

Unfortunately, the product label does not include a warning to protect Liquid Fence® against freezing temperatures. The deed was done, so yelling at the company representative would do no good. He felt terrible and sent me three 40 ounce bottles of Liquid Fence®, advising me to spray right away and again in a week.

After two months and many sightings of deer in the garden, nothing has been touched again. I continue to be amazed that the azaleas weren't touched—not even the Hyatt garden's many deciduous specimens!

Another very hard lesson learned. I can only hope Mother Nature takes pity upon a fool and allows the plants to leaf out and start over. I'll help with Holly-Tone® in March. Wish I could get stock in Liquid Fence®. I'd put a warning on the label about freezing.



▲ Deer devoured the leaves of the *Aucuba japonica* 'Serratifolia'.

Eve Harrison is president of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the ASA. She moved to West Virginia in 1999 and began gardening on the side of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In 2005, she and her husband, Bob, moved to an 11-acre farm in the upper end of the Shenandoah Valley. They relocated 500 pots of trees, shrubs, perennials, and wildflowers from their previous home to the new farm, creating an extensive garden. Deer from the Shenandoah National Park frequently wander onto their property.