

Shoo! Bambi and Peter Rabbit!

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Some thoughts on discouraging rabbits and deer in your garden.

Did you, as a child, fall under the spell of Walt Disney or Beatrix Potter? If so, perhaps you loved the characters they created. As a grown up gardener, however, such appealing images can be gnawed or nibbled away by the activities of their real-life counterparts.

What's worse than lovingly planting a gorgeous scheme only to wake up next morning to find your plants in disarray some pulled right out of the ground? Or with branches snapped off as if with sharp secateurs? Or stripped of leaves to bare stems or right down to the ground?

Of course, you might have been prepared. But how?

Here are some thoughts about how to work with nature, rather than try to repel it by barriers or cunning. (Included here are deer and rabbit fencing, human hair or lion dung and other ingenious contrivances.)

Our first port of call is the RHS website which gives long lists of plants to try (and no guarantees of success). But what, if anything, do these plants have in common, which isn't obvious from the lists? Before getting to that, some preliminaries:
First, any new planting sets out a lovely tasting table for the local wildlife to sample. Stripped stems indicate delicious leaves. So that sadly rules out Phlox. (But the roots may recover and reshoot when removed out of harm's way.) Uprooted plants may still survive if re-planted. If not chewed, they probably didn't prove tasty. Likewise, a single stem snapped off, but others left, probably means the locals didn't want any more of that.
Second, some purple-leaves are like a red rag to a bull. The RHS notes purple-leaved Berberis and Cotinus. One of my clients mentioned variegation as well, but that's not a good guide because.....
....Third, as a general rule evergreen shrubs, including variegated ones such as Euonymus seem to be ignored - presumably too toxic, or too tough. (The sad exception proves to be Yew, which I once

normal">
</div><div>wrongly assumed would be deer-resistant because it kills cows and horses.) Some of them have♦</div><div>
</div><div>thorns too, like Holly. (Not that thorns help with red-leaved Berberis).</div><div>
</div><div>I recently picked up a little book called ♦Poisonous Plants in Great Britain♦ not because there♦s♦</div><div>
</div><div>anyone I particularly want to do away with, but because these are plants that have successfully♦</div><div>
</div><div>avoided being eaten. Standing out as especially nasty, apart from numerous mushrooms, is♦</div><div>
</div><div>Monkshood ♦ Wolfsbane (Aconitum napellus). Victorian medical books gave lurid details of the♦</div><div>
</div><div>symptoms and deaths of gardeners who had inadvertently eaten Aconitum tubers, having confused♦</div><div>
</div><div>them with Jerusalem artichokes. (A sad death recently featured in the national press.) Aconitum is in♦</div><div>
</div><div>the Buttercup family (Ranunculaceae). So too are Clematis, Trollius (Globe Flower), Helleborus,♦</div><div>
</div><div>Actaea (Baneberry), Anemone, Aquilegia, Caltha (Marsh Marigold), Delphinium, Eranthis (Winter♦</div><div>
</div><div>Aconite), Hepatica, Nigella (Love-in-a-mist) and Thalictrum. Not a bad list for starters.</div><div>
</div><div>♦Following this train of thought, what other

botanical families are similarly toxic? Happily, quite a lot. ♦

What follows is in no way a complete list, just some examples of this way of thinking:

The Euphorbiaceae includes all those spring flowering favourites like tall characias, neat evergreen ♦

mounded and shade-tolerant x martini, surprising x griffithii, blue-green creeping myrsinites and ♦

bright yellow front of border polychroma.....not forgetting the slightly tender but sweetly honey-

scented mellifera. In this family also are the Castor Oil Plant, Ricinus communis, highly toxic to ♦

humans as well as animals. As it happens, Poinsettia and Crotons are also family members.

In the Primulaceae are Primroses and Cyclamen. (But they have their Achilles heel, or root, which ♦

vine weevils know only too well.)

The Solanaceae produce not only potato, tomato, aubergine and peppers, but also ornamentals like ♦

climbing Solanum crispum and jasminoides, Petunia and Nicotiana (tobacco plant).

The Papaveraceae are the source of notorious drugs, but also contain useful and attractive garden ♦

sans-serif" color="#222222">plants such as ornamental poppies, Dicentra (Bleeding Heart) and the invasive but splendid

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</div><div>Macleaya cordata (Plume Poppy).</div><div>
</div><div>To throw in a few more: the Convallariaceae includes Lily of the Valley, Liriope (Lilyturf), Ophiopogon

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</div><div>(also called Lilyturf) and Solomon's Seal. The Butchers Broom is a close botanical relative and that

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</div><div>really is a very tough native woodlander.</div><div>
</div><div>Daphne (Thymelaeaceae) is related to the Mallows (Malvaceae) which include Hibiscus, Lavatera,

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</div><div>Abutilon and Hollyhocks.</div><div>
</div><div>Foxgloves are in the Scrophulariaceae family. Others include Antirrhinum, Hebe, Nemesia,

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</div><div>Paulownia, Penstemon, Verbascum and Veronica. Then there are the carrots (Apiaceae, formerly

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</div><div>Umbelliferae) including numerous herbs and, perhaps surprisingly Eryngium and Astrantia. Last, but

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</div><div>not least, are some members of the huge Daisy family (Asteraceae), like Michaelmas Daisies and

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</div><div>Echinops (globe thistle).</div><div>
</div><div>All these

families have representative species in the British Isles which have successfully struggled

with rabbits and deer through many generations. It's a reasonable bet that some or all of their imported botanical relatives are similarly resistant.

Don't think for a moment this is an authoritative essay. Very far from it; it's just a collection of observations. But I've found families a good way of thinking about plants, not just for thwarting Peter Rabbit and Bambi. Families often share other useful traits for the gardener.

Finally, if the RHS can't guarantee their lists, there's absolutely no way I can! P.S. Don't eat these plants, even the Solanaceae, at least in their entirety. Eat up your spuds, tomatoes, etc., but not the leaves and shoots. And remember inquisitive children.

(Source for the families plants belong to: Flowering Plant Families of the World. Heywood, et al. Published by RBG Kew 2007)

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