


# Deer-Resistant Container Gardens

Even if deer visit your garden, you can grow lush, captivating combinations in containers if you select the right plants.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN CHAPMAN



**E**NTERTAINING FRIENDS on the patio, surrounded by flourishing pots of plants, needn't be forfeited just because deer may crash the party. For those of us who live in deer country, trying to outwit the deer is a lifelong challenge. The only foolproof way to keep deer from eating plants in your garden is to deny them entry in the first place, and while some gardeners might install tall fences, for many homeowners this isn't an option. In this case, the best strategy is to choose plants wisely, aiming to incorporate only those that are reliably deer-resistant. Fortunately, there are a lot of options. Use the creative container designs on the following pages to explore the possibilities, or use them as a springboard for your own ideas. 

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## STYLISH DUET

*Shimmering shades of silver, white, and celadon form a delicate framework accented by flamingo-pink. From the dramatic foliage of the speckled Japanese aralia to the broad metallic blades of the astelia and froth of white lobelia blooms, this potted duet will certainly garner the attention of your guests—but thankfully not the deer. Site: Partial shade.*

■ **'Pandola' flamingo flower** (*Anthurium* 'Pandola'). Grown for its glossy pink flower (technically a spathe, a type of bract), this popular houseplant is a bold addition to shade gardens and containers in summer. Grows one-and-a-half feet tall and wide. USDA Hardiness Zones 10–11. Deer resistance: B.

**'Ghost' fern** (*Athyrium* 'Ghost'). An upright herbaceous fern that has silver

fronds with a burgundy midrib. Grows two feet tall and wide in full or partial shade. Zones 4–8. Deer resistance: A.

**Himalayan maidenhair fern** (*Adiantum venustum*). Lacy layers of bright green held on wiry black stems. This evergreen fern spreads slowly to form a feathery groundcover. Grows six inches tall and three feet wide in partial shade. Zones 5–8. Deer resistance: A.

**Bossa Nova 'Pure White' begonia** (*Begonia boliviensis* Bossa Nova 'Pure White'). A continuous summer display of pendulous white blooms on coral-pink stems earns this drought-tolerant tuberous begonia a place in containers and baskets for shade. Grows 16 inches tall, 16 to 20 inches wide. Zones 7–10. Deer resistance: B.

**'Spider's Web' Japanese aralia** (*Fatsia japonica* 'Spider's Web'). This evergreen





shrub thrives in the shade, its youngest foliage exhibiting the most dramatic speckled coloration. Grows three to five feet tall and wide. Zones 7–11. Deer resistance: B.

**‘Silver Shadow’ astelia** (*Astelia* ‘Silver Shadow’). A drought-tolerant evergreen perennial with bold, metallic silver leaves. Grows two to three feet tall and two to four feet wide. Zones 7–11. Deer resistance: B.

**‘Laguna White’ lobelia** (*Lobelia erinus* ‘Laguna White’). A low-maintenance summer annual with small white flowers throughout the season. Grows eight to 12 inches tall and trails or spreads up to two feet. Zones 9–11. Deer resistance: A.

## DEER-RESISTANT PLANTS

Most experts will tell you that deer are less tempted by plants that contain poisonous compounds, or those with sharp thorns or aromatic or fuzzy foliage. While I do agree these are good general guidelines, in my own garden I have witnessed deer chomping on spiky barberries as well as a highly toxic castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis* ‘Carmencita’), and thorns certainly do not deter them from eating the roses. It is, however, a place to start.



No plant is entirely deer-proof, and plants vary considerably in their degree of deer resistance, from those that are rarely nibbled to others that suffer frequent damage. Adding to the complexity, the level of resistance may vary with season, availability of other food sources, the age of the deer, weather conditions, and the herd itself. From state to state the differences were even more marked—cultivars of heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) being eaten to the ground in Washington yet considered a deer-resistant shrub in parts of Texas, for example.

In an effort to make sense of all this and provide meaningful, helpful information to homeowners, I have adopted the rating system used by the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station (NJAES), which identifies four levels of deer resistance:

- A = Rarely Damaged
- B = Seldom Severely Damaged
- C = Occasionally Severely Damaged
- D = Frequently Severely Damaged

The Rutgers website ([njaes.rutgers.edu/deer-resistant-plants](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/deer-resistant-plants)) includes a searchable list of landscape plants, each rated for deer resistance. This list was compiled with input from nursery and landscape professionals, NJAES and Cooperative Extension personnel, and Master Gardeners in northern New Jersey. They recommend that plants in categories A and B would be best for landscapes prone to deer damage. Plants in categories C and D should be planted only with additional protection, such as the use of repellents.

When citing deer-resistance ratings for plants that were not included in Rutgers’ list, I relied upon the knowledge and experience of local professionals and respected horticultural organizations.

—K.C.





## MIXED SPICE

*Sandwiched between the tropical canna leaves and cut-leaf golden elderberry is a spicy floral feast of blanketflower, lantana, sage, and crocosmia. Pulling all these sassy blooms together in a single shiny leaf is the aptly named 'Inferno' mirror plant. The feathery lotus vine and dark leaves of 'Persian Chocolate' creeping Jenny add the final flavors as they spill out of the pot. Site: Full sun.*

■ **'Madeira' canna lily** (*Canna* 'Madeira'). A dwarf canna sporting fresh-green leaves and flaming-red blooms edged with gold. Grows up to three feet tall and one foot wide. Zones 8–11. Deer resistance: B.

**'African Sunset' canna lily** (*Canna* 'African Sunset'). Boldly variegated leaves in shades of orange, maroon, green, and gold

are the colorful foil for the large orange flowers. Grows four to six feet tall, three feet wide. Zones 8–11. Deer resistance: B.

**'Celebration' blanketflower** (*Gaillardia*  $\times$  *grandiflora* 'Celebration'). Rich red flowers appear throughout summer on this compact herbaceous perennial, whose deer resistance appears to vary con-

siderably with the herd. Deadheading encourages rebloom. Drought tolerant once established. Grows 14 to 16 inches tall and wide. Zones 5–9. Deer resistance: A–C.

**'Pink Carmine' crocosmia** (*Crocosmia* 'Pink Carmine'). Salmon-pink blooms appear from midsummer through fall on this herbaceous perennial. Grows two feet tall and 10 inches wide. Zones 6–11. Deer resistance: B.

**'Lemony Lace' elderberry** (*Sambucus racemosa* 'Lemony Lace'). Forming a feathery, yellow mound, this scorch-resistant elderberry will shine in the garden. White spring blooms, a red edge on newly emerging foliage, and red autumnal berries add to the display. Benefits from pruning after bloom to improve shape. Grows three to six feet tall and about as wide. Zones 3–7. Deer resistance: A.

**'Inferno' mirror plant** (*Coprosma* 'Inferno'). Where hardy, this glossy evergreen shrub will grow four to five feet tall and wide. Even as an annual, it's worth seeking out for its red, orange, and green variegated foliage, though the shrub will be much smaller. Zones 9–11. Deer resistance: A.

**'Bandana Rose' lantana** (*Lantana camara* 'Bandana Rose'). Bright pink-and-sunny yellow flowers attract hummingbirds and butterflies on this variety, which is almost sterile. Grows one to two feet tall and two to three feet wide as an annual, larger where it is hardy. Zones 9–11. Deer resistance: A.

**'Scarlet' lotus vine** (*Lotus berthelotii* 'Scarlet'). Vivid scarlet blooms and feathery blue-green foliage combine delightfully to trail from hanging baskets and containers. Grows six to 10 inches tall and spreads two feet. Zones 9–11 but usually enjoyed as an annual. Deer resistance: A.

**'Persian Chocolate' creeping Jenny** (*Lysimachia congestiflora* 'Persian Chocolate'). Dark chocolate-colored leaves and golden blooms make this trailing plant popular for containers, but it may also be grown as a groundcover reaching to six inches tall and spreading one to three feet wide in moisture-retentive soil. Zones 6–9. Deer resistance: A.



## TROPICAL ROMANCE

Add a twist to the tropical flavor of giant elephant's ear by underplanting it with a soft froth of 'Diamond Frost' spurge, whose abundant, tiny white blooms lend a distinctive feminine touch. Variegated hebe keeps up the monochromatic scheme with crisp green-and-white foliage, while chartreuse sweet potato vine can be relied upon to cascade over the edge of the pot. An occasional spritz of deer repellent on the sweet potato vine may be wise, as some herds find it tasty. Site: Partial shade.



■ **Giant elephant's ear** (*Alocasia macrorrhiza*). In its natural habitat, this tropical perennial may grow 12 to 15 feet tall and six to 10 feet wide but is likely to be half that when grown as an annual. Needs regular water and fertilizer to thrive, and does best when protected from direct sun and strong winds. Zones 9–11. Deer resistance: B.

■ **'Diamond Frost' spurge** (*Euphorbia* 'Diamond Frost'). This heat- and drought-tolerant plant is usually grown as a summer annual, relied upon to produce clouds of white blooms throughout the season. Grows one-and-a-half feet tall and wide. Zones 10–11. Deer resistance: A.

■ **Variegated hebe** (*Hebe* 'Variegata'). Creamy white-and-green leaves and compact habit make this evergreen shrub a popular choice for both containers and the landscape. Purple flowers in summer attract bees and butterflies. Zones 8–10. Deer resistance: B.

■ **'Margarita' sweet potato vine** (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Margarita'). A vigorous trailing annual with heart-shaped, chartreuse leaves. May scorch in full sun but generally considered suitable for partial shade. Deer may eat these if a repellent spray is not used; if preferred, substitute with deadnettle (*Lamium maculatum*) or Siberian bugloss (*Brunnera macrophylla*), both of which are shade tolerant and more reliably deer-resistant. Grows to 10 inches tall and six feet long. Deer resistance: D.

This article is an adapted excerpt from **Deer-Resistant Design: Fence-Free Gardens that Thrive Despite the Deer** by Kar-



en Chapman, published by Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2019. Used with permission of the publisher.