



Edit Jan '24: One of the nurseries we work with recommended an herbivore deterrent they use on plants they manage for seed- **Plantskydd, a harmless, organic spray or pellet application.** It requires reapplication either every 3 months or when new growth appears, depending on the form used. It's worked well in our early experiments with it, and we now offer it for sale online in the winter months with pickup at our plant sales by request. A possible alternative especially for herbaceous plants if cages aren't desired or feasible! Some browsing by herbivores can actually increase the amount of blooms and seeds on your plants so this may be a good compromise with herbivores :)

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On Deer and Rabbit Fencing

To fence, or not to fence? That is...

... almost never the question, unfortunately. In areas with rabbits or deer, it's always a good idea to protect new native plants with a fence.

Just like native insects prefer native plants, native herbivores prefer plants they've evolved alongside too. The sudden disappearance or destruction of new plantings catches many gardeners—beginners to veterans—off guard (us too!). We've all been used to wildlife largely ignoring non-native landscape plants; they're generally less desirable as food.

In recent decades, unmanaged "wild" landscapes have become overrun with non-native and invasive plants that have little to no nutritional value. So, when wild animal neighbors spy your generous offering of a delectable snack, they will often quickly and entirely eat your new plant. Even a test nibble can end up pulling your plant up from the roots. "Deer/rabbit *resistant*" species are not "deer/rabbit *proof*." If there's nothing else to eat, they'll give it a go. Chipmunks and other rodents may dig up seeds, tubers, and even bulbs to eat; squirrels enjoy sprouted nuts as well as digging in the freshly disturbed soil of new plantings. Deer have even been known to dig up and eat the shallow and nutritious tubers of sunchokes!

(See footnote for more information, and advice on what to do if your plantings get munched!)

For these reasons NPU recommends the following where deer and/or rabbits are an issue:

- **Fence new plants for at least a year** so they have a chance to establish. Afterwards, most can survive some browsing and apparently aren't as yummy. Do not hesitate to adjust fencing if plants are routinely heavily browsed! Make the enclosure taller and/or wider as the plant grows (especially true for shrubs). Species that are particularly favored (e.g. *Liatris* and many species of legumes) may need longer protection so they can withstand heavier browsing, or, in extreme cases, may need permanent protection. Basic fencing suggestions, tips, and pictured examples are provided below!
- **Guard the trunks of trees and shrubs** until they are *at least 6" in diameter*. Deer will rub their antlers on almost any woody species, and seem to have a sixth sense as to which ones would be the most inconvenient to damage.
- **Plant densely.** Not only does this make herbivores more likely to “overlook” some plants, it may spread out their browsing so plants are less affected. When given the choice, herbivores will often eat tender new growth off of many plants rather than eat one plant to the ground. Plantings can begin sparsely, and seeds can be scattered between them for a budget-friendly, dense planting. Use purchased seeds, seeds gathered from parks (where permitted), or seeds harvested from your starter plants.

Rabbit Fencing



In a suburban situation, rabbit fencing is usually all that's needed. A reusable, home made wire fence for a single plant is pictured below. The white prairie clover pictured is a new plant added to an existing but not yet filled in planting. It was a legume clearly exposed and ripe for rabbit-munching, so a fence was definitely necessary!

Hardware cloth (which is a coarse wire mesh, not fabric) is the easiest material to use for a rabbit fence and can be purchased in most hardware stores. Rolls of hardware cloth can usually be found near the chicken wire. Chicken wire is a cheaper option and can be used, but it's generally harder to work with and less sturdy, which makes cages difficult to reuse. Where aesthetics are a concern, like in front yard beds, hardware cloth



coated in green vinyl is also often available (pictured below). Smaller beds can be completely closed in with fencing, but individual plant cages are useful in larger plantings, particularly when new plants are added to an established bed.

Below are examples of a brand of hardware cloth that happened to be at Menards. Any brand of metal based mesh works! It is easy to cut with wire cutters, tin snips, aviation snips, and similar tools. We do not recommend plastic mesh due to its difficulty to use and reuse, and potential entanglement hazard to wildlife.

Just cut a length equal to the desired circumference of your cage (a length of 18 inches is usually good for young plants, and will make a cage ~6 inch in diameter. Tweak as desired). A height of a

foot and a half deters most rabbits though tempting plants may still receive a haircut (the little blighters stretch up on their tiptoes!). Two feet is a safe height. Most rolls come wrapped with extra wire to keep them compact, and this can be cut into shorter lengths and used to wire the cage closed. If your roll doesn't have extra wire, twist ties or even string can be used.

Remember—if you're fencing an entire bed with hardware cloth to keep rabbits out, get at least a three foot tall roll of hardware cloth! Rabbits can't jump into a two foot tall tube, but they can jump a two foot tall fence! One would think they could jump a three foot fence too, but it usually does the trick. Taller fencing also supports taller plants, which is a bonus along edges and walkways! Below is a fence put in for plant support, but rabbit fencing works the same way. Note the stakes used to keep the fence upright!

Deer Fencing

Similar to rabbit fencing around a bed, but scaled up! We recommend wire fencing at least 5 feet tall and metal stakes at least six feet tall. Remember—at least a foot of your stakes will go in the ground! To the right, and in some photos below, are round enclosures protecting herbaceous plantings with those dimensions. Enclosures that fence off a much larger area (such as an entire portion of a yard) are safer with 6ft high fencing since deer are more comfortable jumping fences with plenty of room to land on the other side.



Small plants can get away with smaller cages, roughly large enough for a person to kneel in, with three foot tall fencing and four foot tall stakes. Shorter (3') fencing is cheaper, but deer will lean into the fence to bend it down and snip the tops off of whatever they can reach, so is best used only for short shrubs.



4'-5' fencing and a 5'-6' stake is ideal for a single tree or large shrub. To the left is a young oak tree at Oliver's Woods Nature Preserve that looks to have 4' fencing secured to a 6' stake, a cost effective and reusable setup that can be left in place to protect the trunk until it's 10" in diameter.

Wire fencing (a 2"x4" mesh is typical and pictured) and metal stakes can be found at hardware stores such as Lowe's and Menards. Heavy-duty tin snips or bolt cutters will be needed to cut this heavier gauge wire. Stakes will need to be pounded into the ground with a sledgehammer or post driver. Large rocks are serviceable in a pinch, but awkward to use and can break. Post drivers are recommended for large projects, or long lasting projects. These fences can be moved but, if they're left in one place long term, stakes will likely need re-driven every few years. See the drunken post below that needs to be reset.



Fencing can be closed by securing it to the stakes with wire, but we at NPU have found this to be overkill in most cases. One end of the fencing can simply be bent around a post to secure it at the beginning, and the other end bent to hook into the mesh at the closure. This allows easy access to the inside of the enclosure without the trouble of having to untwist weathered wire.

Trunk Guards

Deer, when scent marking or rubbing the velvet from their antlers, frequently scrape the bark from the trunks of young trees. Trees along paths or out in the open are particularly prone to damage. Trunk guards protect young trees, and do not need to be heavy duty.

Tree guards are occasionally available at hardware stores and labeled as such, with no assembly required-- unlike the rest of the types we've mentioned. However, they're easy to make using the materials above. A quick and visually subtle trunk guard can be made from a tomato cage cut up one side. Forestry tubes, usually used to protect tree seedlings, can also be secured around the trunks of saplings.

Trees should be safe after their trunks are over ~8-10 inches in diameter.

Remember to adjust/remove trunk guards as trees grow- constrictions can kill trees, or reduce their lifespan by compromising the integrity of their trunks.



Is Nothing Safe?

...Not really. If you have some 'pet' plants, ones that are favored or expensive or you would otherwise be disheartened if they were munched, just fence it. The only flowering plants the NPU team have **never** seen browsed are mints (including bee balms) and penstemon, but even these could be dug up, or receive a curious chomp when newly planted. Don't worry- eventually you'll develop a feel for what plants are going to bring the wildlife to the yard.

When in doubt: fence it! We hope this guide helps you do just that, and makes it easier to establish plants for the benefit of humans and wildlife. Good luck on your projects from the NPU team!

If critters get to your plants, DON'T give up on them! Native plants are tenacious, and most can withstand a good deal of browsing. Even if you find one yanked up by the roots, *even if the roots are dried out*, put it back, water it, protect it, and wait. They'll frequently surprise you. It may take them some time to regroup, but, as we always say- "They live in their roots." Your patience and trust will very often be rewarded!