

TO FEED OR NOT TO FEED?

Information compiled by Mary Lou Childs.

This article is made up of a collection of writings by wildlife biologists and others who specialize in deer and elk. Most of this article is copied directly from websites for Departments of Fish & Wildlife from various states. It is unanimous among wildlife professionals: Feeding deer is a bad idea.

Many people think feeding deer is like feeding the birds but there are some critical differences that make feeding deer unhealthy for them. People are doing harm out of uninformed kindness to the deer they are trying to help. Read on to be informed, then decide what you want to do – especially this winter when you see the deer walking through your yard.

Deer are “ruminants” and have a 4-chambered stomach. They rely on microorganisms in their gut to break down the food in stages. When feeding naturally, deer adapt their diets with the changing seasons, eating *naturally-occurring foods* from one season, while gradually converting to what's available in the next season. This allows the microorganisms in their stomach to slowly adjust from one food source to the newer food source. It takes up to four weeks to adjust completely to new foods.

A healthy deer diet contains forbs (non-grass plants such as dandelions and wildflowers), brush (leaves, twig ends, buds, bark), some fruits *in season*, and a small amount of grass. In short, they eat little starch or carbohydrates, but a lot of fiber. Fiber in the form of cellulose from plants is useful to deer not only for energy, but also for keeping the rumen (the first chamber of their four-chamber stomach) healthy. Deer need a fibrous diet and could not exist for long solely on a concentrated ration of carbohydrates (apples, corn, bread, etc.).

Since deer are browsers they will move along while feeding. If people attract them to the same location daily with apples or other treats, then the deer over-browse landscaping in that area. So instead of neighbors enjoying an occasional visit by the deer as they browse on by, they can become viewed as destructive pests. Having landscaping nibbled to the sticks is expensive, is a hassle to replace, and can lead to conflict between neighbors when one is attracting deer to the area. Left to simply browse naturally, deer would not do as much damage as when they are attracted daily to an area by food that may actually be unhealthy for them to eat.

Winter Feeding: By late Fall, deer instinctively reduce their food intake and continue to do so through most of the winter. During this time deer rely heavily on fat reserves, their metabolisms slow down, and to conserve energy they are less active. During winter, deer lose 20 percent or more of their body weight by burning fat reserves. A 1984 Pennsylvania study found that deer could survive at least a month with no food at all. They are well adapted to survive the many stresses that winter presents. Their biggest need in winter is shelter during prolonged periods of very cold weather.

In winter, the microorganisms within the deer stomach are different from the microorganisms the rest of the year. This change allows deer to ingest a diet of woody browse and turn the high-fiber diet into protein. They are not starving if they are eating bark or twigs on trees – this is *natural* winter food for them. To abruptly change the deers' food intake negatively effects their digestive system, causing problems from bloating to diarrhea to death. In some areas where well-meaning people have fed deer the wrong kind of food, deer have died with a stomach full of food they can't digest. Many deer have starved to death during winter with stomachs packed full of hay. Corn is what most wildlife lovers offer deer, and even if it's labeled “deer corn,” feeding corn to deer is about the worst thing you can do -- unless you're trying to kill them. (That's what it said on the website!) When offered a sudden supply of corn, a deer's digestive system doesn't have time to adjust to a high carbohydrate diet. The result can be acute acidosis followed by death within 72 hours. Every year the Oregon Dept. of Fish & Wildlife sees seemingly healthy deer and elk die because they have been fed the wrong food by well-intentioned people. Do not feed to deer: Hay, corn, kitchen scraps, potatoes, bread, apples, or cabbage/lettuce trimmings. Just because deer will eat food provided by humans does not mean it is good for them. Proper feed is natural browse items. Acorns can be given as supplements to their natural diet.

Some people will say, “The deer were here first.” Yes, they were, but in our neighborhood they now have an even wider variety and abundant supply of plants, shrubs, and trees to munch on than they had in the forest that was here before the houses were built. It's doubtful the deer ate apples and other treats before the neighborhood was put in unless from an occasional apple tree in somebody's yard in the late summer or fall when the apples were on the tree naturally. There are no predators to kill off the old or infirmed deer, but the wrong kind of food given by well-intentioned people might unwittingly thin out the deer population here with no discrimination between young, old, healthy, and sickly. Do what is best for the deer – do not feed them.

