

## Oh, Deer!

It takes an arsenal of repellents to keep Bambi at bay—maybe

By MARY ANN MCGANN

**M**y approach to gardening is part optimism, part masochism. I'm optimistic because I continue to believe I can outsmart the deer that systematically destroy my plants, and masochistic because I continue to believe I can outsmart the deer that systematically destroy my plants.

When my family moved to the heavily forested Warren Township, we would ooh and ah in delight each time we'd see those graceful creatures with their soft brown eyes roaming our 1-plus-acre property. And don't even get me started on those incredibly cute fawns with their white-dotted fur and spindly legs.

Fast forward five years and endless wasted expenditures on foliage, and you'll find us rushing out the door, maniacally hooting and hollering and waving our hands wildly to chase the critters off our lawn.

Short of erecting a very tall fence, I've tried everything. Deer repellents that smell minty fresh and ones that smell like rotten eggs. Spices from my kitchen, such as ground chili pepper and garlic. Irish Spring bath soap — the original, because it has a sharply sweet scent said to keep deer grazing to a minimum. Human hair — yes, hair — swept up at the salon after my kids got a trim. Sprays and granules that list ingredients such as oil of black pepper, vinegar, cinnamon and clove oils, onion and cod liver oil. Oh yeah, and dried blood, an ingredient that prompted my 8-year-old son to ask, "Whose blood is it?" I inquired and found this particular repellent is made from ground roadkill. Nice.

"We didn't even sell deer repellent when we opened," says Tom Gallo, owner of Country Mile Gardens in Morristown, which has been in business for 30 years. "Now we have an entire aisle of it. And it sells all week, every week."

"So many people want to guarantee that certain plants are deer-proof," says Suzanne Marion, who works at Ash's Flower Farm in Hillsborough. "And nothing is. If the deer are hungry enough, they're going to eat basically anything."

The New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station at Rutgers, along with most gardening and landscape operations, offer lists of flora thought to be "deer-resistant," an effort aimed at helping gardeners co-exist with herds of deer that, with a lack of natural predators, are ever increasing in New Jersey. But deer-resistant does not mean deer-proof.

"I can tell you a plant is deer-resistant. And you come home



Sure, they're cute. And obnoxious.

and it's bitten or pulled out of the ground," says Rob Bardy, owner of Bardy Farms in Warren. "If 40 deer go by and each one takes a taste to see if they like it, it's gone. It's decimated."

That said, there are a few steps you can take to help protect your landscaping investment, if you're not in a position to fence your yard.

- Find out what really is deer-proof (it's an extremely short list). Boxwood shrubs are a sure thing, for example. And some flowering annuals and perennials, such as vinca, snapdragons and salvia bring color to your garden without enticing our long-legged friends.

- "If you're not sure — rather than making a huge investment, buy one of something and try it," Marion suggests. "I know within two or three nights" if the deer are going to eat it.

- Consistently apply deer repellents as directed, advises Bardy. And reapply on new growth or after a heavy rainfall.

- Fence in or net your plants during winter. Says Gallo: "When they're hungry, they'll eat through any kind of repellent."

My garden does reasonably well if I follow these steps absolutely. But the minute I let down my guard — neglecting to re-spray after a downpour or foolishly buying a flowering plant that both the deer and I love — fuhgeddaboutit! I awoken to closely cropped, ragged stems where healthy vegetation once grew.

I close with one final remedy of which I've only heard. Because deer are said to abhor human scent (hence, the human hair sprinklings), there are those — it is said — who pee on their shrubbery to keep Bambi away.

No one I know has tried this technique. And I'm not that desperate. Yet. ☹