

2010 01 06 Alamosa Trees
by Marilyn Loser
Oh Deer! Rename Alamosa to Antlers?

It's that time of year again. Deer seem almost as numerous as students at Adams State College. They stroll through the town, run into traffic, and attack trees, shrubs, and the occasional pet. I enjoy seeing deer on the golf course (don't know how golfers and their shoes feel about this) and in the bosque. I hate them in my yard. I live in Southern Alamosa, nowhere near the bosque, and never had a deer in my yard until 3 years ago.

Apparently, the Alamosa herd is increasing. As food becomes scarce in the winter, they widen their browsing range. Deer have no natural predators here, and they are prolific. A failed deer hunt in early 2007 did little more than create headlines nationwide. Even USA Today documented the event and quoted City Manager Nathan Cherpeski as saying, "At best, it's going to slow the growth." Only 11 deer were harvested; motorists were reportedly more successful in culling the herd.

Why am I so peeved about the deer? They love my young aspen trees and mugo pines. A couple of my mugos look like the work of Edward Scissorhands on a bad day. Deer also find spring bulbs a special treat. Bucks scrape their antlers against trees. Deer can severely damage and even kill plants.

Deer have free rein over Alamosa. Perhaps we should rename our town, named for its cottonwoods, to "Antlers", as suggested by the Colorado Independent.

Alamosa is not alone in its deer plight. Towns such as Warsaw, Ind., Fort Smith, Ark., and Kansas City, Mo., conducted deer hunts. Seemingly, their hunts were as successful as Alamosa's.

What can we do? Perhaps we could expand Colorado's "make my day" law to include deer. Maybe we should invite ex-Vice-President "Buckshot" Cheney to town. How about making Alamosa an amnesty city for poachers? We could consider deer birth control.

On a more practical note there are some things you can do. The best strategy is to keep deer out of your yard in the first place. For darn sure, don't feed them! Did you know it is illegal to feed deer? Maybe you don't want to drive them away, but please, let them remain wild. Deer are creatures of habit; if they become accustomed to your yard, it will be hard to keep them away no matter what deterrent you use.

Some sources suggest planting only species deer don't tend to like. This doesn't always work well in Alamosa. In harsh, snowy years, people have reported deer eating lilac stems – a shrub they typically avoid.

Species rarely browsed by mule deer include lilacs, Russian olives, sagebrush, rabbitbrush, barberry, snowberry, forsythia, and potentilla.

Species preferred by deer include pines, juniper, oaks, hackberries, apples, hawthorns, various dogwoods, and all prunus (this includes plums, chokecherries, and almonds).

Physical barriers work. Fencing an entire yard with an 8-10 foot high fence is too costly and aesthetically displeasing for many. However, you can protect individual, young trees. For mule deer, a 4-foot high fence with openings of 4” or less placed far enough from the tree to prevent browsing usually suffices.

Local businesses sell a wide assortment of repellents intended to discourage deer through odor or taste. I’ve tried 2 varieties. One, a spray, seemed to work pretty well, but it required at least monthly applications – more if it rained or snowed. The bottle asserted only a one-year shelf life. A second was Deer Fortress, a canister that you hang from the tree or stick in the ground near a plant. This seemed to work and has a viable life of about a year.

I’ve had people recommend several home-made repellents which usually involve eggs, or should I say rotten egg odor. A couple of these recipes are posted on the AlamosaTrees.net web site under the newspaper tab. Some people strew human hair around their trees. Research hasn’t shown these deterrents to be consistently effective.

Online shopping sites have all sorts of deer-repellant products. There are motion activated noise devices, usually radios that annoy your neighbors more than the deer. Motion activated sprinklers or bright lights are also offered. Customer responses did not encourage me to purchase any of these devices.

I’m very grateful for all the wonderful material on the Internet from organizations such as the International Society for Arboriculture (www.isa-arbor.com), Arbor Day Foundation (www.arborday.org), various state forest extensions (for Colorado: www.ext.colostate.edu), and regional US Forest Service sites (for the Rocky Mountain Region: www.fs.fed.us/r2/) to name a few. In addition to the web sites, there are many fine publications promoted by these associations.

“A tree never hits an automobile except in self-defense.” Author Unknown