



Gardening Among Hungry Mammals

By mimicking the way plants mingle together in natural communities, we can create more resilient gardens that feed all wildlife, including furry herbivores. Strategic planting builds on the tendencies of vulnerable plants to acquire extra resistance and defenses when they grow in diverse species mixtures.

This guide is just a sampling of plants that have worked in my habitat. It includes “deterrent” and “protector” plants that are less appealing to mammals and can also help safeguard more vulnerable species in mixed plantings. It also includes browse-resilient species, or those that might be tastier but can usually mount enough defenses to bounce back. These species, or closely related ones, are native to all or most of the Eastern U.S. To check native status in your area, consult online databases, including BONAP (Biota of North American Program) and the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center’s native plant database.

Of course, context is everything; every environment is different, and the plants that mammals choose to eat depend on time of year, what else is growing in your garden and in the local community, abundance and placement of plants, weather, and the preferences of individual animals. Diversity is key; plants don’t grow in single-species straight lines. Mix it up, experiment with your own combinations and ideas, and watch the magic happen! The rewards of sharing your garden are many.

Less appealing deterrent and protector plants

These native plants are less likely to be of interest to nibbling mammals, but they provide shelter for them and offer food and habitat for other wildlife too. Some are effective “bodyguard” plants, protecting more vulnerable species nearby.

Tall to medium-height wildflowers

Late Boneset (*Eupatorium serotinum*)
Wild/Maryland senna (*Senna hebecarpa*/ *S. marilandica*)
Wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*)
Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*)
Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)
Agastaches (*A. nepetoides*, *A. foeniculum*)
Mountain mints (*Pycnanthemum muticum* / *tenuifolium*)
Burnweed (*Erechtites hieraciifolius*)
Aromatic aster (*Symphotricum oblongifolium*)
False nettle (*Boehmeria cylindrica*)
Wingstem (*Verbesina alternifolia*)

Shorter wildflowers for the border edge

Wild basil (*Clinopodium vulgare*)
Blue waxweed (*Cuphea viscosissima*) – annual
Butterflyweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)
Golden alexander (*Zizia aurea*)

Groundcovers

Golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*)
Elephant’s foot (*Elephantopus carolinianus*)
Pussytoes (*Antennaria* spp.)
Robin’s plantain (*Erigeron pulchellus*)
Clearweed (*Pilea pumila*) - annual
White avens (*Geum canadense*)
Wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*)
Canada anemone (*Anemone canadensis*)
Golden alexander (*Zizia aurea*)

Ferns, sedges, and grasses

Ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)
Hayscented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*)
Sensitive fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*)
Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)
Broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*)
Big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*)
Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

Sea/river oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*)
Indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)
Sedges (*Carex appalachica, rosea, flaccosperma, etc.*)

Shrubs & Vines

Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)
Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)
Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*)
Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*)
Virgin's bower (*Clematis virginiana*)
Coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*)
Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)

Trees

American holly (*Ilex americana*)
Eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)
Pines (*Pinus* spp.)
Sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*)

Herbs (nonnative) for “barrier border” in veg or other garden

Lavender, rosemary, sage
Garlic, onions, chives

Tasty but resilient plants

These native plants are often nibbled by deer, rabbits and/or other mammals, yet they are hardy and well-adapted to herbivory and make excellent buffers as well as pollinator and bird-friendly plants. Many often sprout on their own in gardens and lawns. Plants that are easy to share with animals include those that spread and seed prolifically and those that are resilient in the face of browsing.

Tall or medium wildflowers

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*)
Common evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*)
Goldenrods (*Solidago* spp. – many kinds, but Canada goldenrod is a favorite for nibblers)
Brown-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia triloba*) & relatives
Swamp sunflowers (*Helianthus angustifolius*) & relatives
Jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*) - annual

Wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*)
Enchanter's nightshade (*Circaea canadensis*)

Grasses & Sedges

Purpletop grass (*Tridens flavus*)
Eastern woodland sedge (*Carex blanda*)

Shrubs & Vines

Virginia rose (*Rosa virginiana*) and other native rose species
Black raspberry (*Rubus occidentalis*)
Allegheny blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*)
Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*)
Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*)
Silky dogwood (*Cornus/Snida amomum*)
Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)
Grapevines (*Vitis* spp.)

Shorter wildflowers

Fleabane (*Erigeron annuus* and *E. philadelphicus*) - annuals
Partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*) - annual
**I also recommend mixing in tall tasty perennials at the edge of the border or pathway – or simply leaving them there when they reseed – because animals often browse them and induce a shorter, bushier habit.*

Trees

Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*)
Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*)
Smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*)

Groundcovers

Common blue violet (*Viola sororia*)

Resources for coexisting with mammals

- “Deer Eat This Garden (and It Flourishes)”: humanegardener.com/deer-eat-this-garden-and-it-flourishes
- “Gardening for Deer”: humanegardener.com/gardening-for-deer
- “Gardening with Rabbits”: humanegardener.com/gardening-with-rabbits
- “Squirrels: Nature’s Real Gardeners”: humanegardener.com/squirrels-natures-real-gardeners
- “Moles: Underground Wonders”: humanegardener.com/moles-underground-wonders

- “The Misunderstood Coyote”: humanesociety.org/news/misunderstood-coyote
- *Wild Neighbors* book by John Hadidian: animalsheltering.org/page/wild-neighbors-book
- *The Wildlife-Friendly Vegetable Gardener* book by Tammi Hartung
- *The Humane Gardener* book by Nancy Lawson
- *Wildscape: Trilling Chipmunks, Beckoning Blooms, Salty Butterflies, and Other Sensory Wonders of Nature* by Nancy Lawson

Websites for identifying plants and learning floral/faunal associations:

- iNaturalist: inaturalist.org
- Illinois Wildflowers: www.illinoiswildflowers.info
- Go Botany: gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org/
- Forest Service/USDA Fire Effects Information System: www.feis-crs.org/feis/
- Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center: www.wildflower.org/plants

Resources for exclusion products and advice

- Garden Commander moveable cages, <https://garden-commander.business.site/>
- I Must Garden repellents, imustgarden.com
- The Beaver Institute, <http://beaverinstitute.org/>
- Wild Neighbors, Humane Society of the United States, humanesociety.org/wildneighbors