

Is Feeding Deer Harmful?



Why Do People Feed Deer?

Feeding wild animals can be an enjoyable experience as it can bring even the most secretive species right to you. Many people enjoy seeing white-tailed deer up close, and feel good about providing an easy meal, especially during times when food may be scarce. Unfortunately, despite the immediate pleasure, in the long run feeding deer causes more harm than good.

More Harm than Good

Habituation

Deer can overcome their natural wariness around people when easy food is provided to them, especially near homes. This may be the goal, but it usually comes with unintended consequences. Deer that usually roam a wide area will spend the majority of their time near an artificial food source. In residential settings this often leads to conflicts as unwilling neighbors are forced to endure expensive damage to gardens or landscaping from foraging deer, increased risk of hitting deer on the road, or even noise issues as deer learn to ignore barking dogs. Deer feed often attracts other wildlife such as raccoons, foxes, coyotes, and rodents, which may also be unwelcome visitors to you or your neighbors. You may be happy to attract a menagerie to your yard, but your neighbors may not.



Deer will eat anything near a feeding area, including items you don't intend for them to eat. (Photo: Falya Owens)

Spreading Disease

Deer naturally forage alone or in small groups, spreading out to sample natural foods which are usually spread across the landscape. Artificial feeding sites, however, attract many deer and other wildlife to one spot. Contagious diseases such as Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), distemper, and rabies can be spread through close contact, skirmishes over food, and contaminated soil or feed. For deer in particular, CWD spreads very easily through saliva, urine, and feces, and stays infectious in the soil for many years. Though CWD has not yet been found in North Carolina as of summer 2020, feeding deer could help this deadly disease spread quickly if it arrives in the state.



Tree damage caused by browsing deer. (Photo: Mark Bennett)

Unhealthy “Junk Food”

For better or for worse, products like “deer corn” are much like junk food for deer, and can cause painful ailments such as acidosis, enterotoxaemia, aflatoxin poisoning, and deformities like foundering hooves, which makes it difficult for deer to walk normally. As ruminants, deer have a specific blend of microbes in their stomach that break down their naturally high-fiber diet. Large amounts of carbohydrate-rich, low fiber foods like deer corn can disrupt this microbiome — leading to bouts of severe diarrhea and dehydration that could be deadly.

What Can I Do?

If you are already feeding deer and would like to stop, slowly decrease the amount of food you offer over a period of several weeks. This way the deer will have time to adjust their browsing habits and focus on more healthy, natural foods.



A high-carbohydrate diet of deer corn can cause a condition called foundering hooves in deer. (Photo: Charles Sanders)



Deer feeding on homeowner's landscaping (Photo: Chad Stewart)

Supplemental feeding — however well intentioned — either compromises the animal's wildness or wellness, or it interferes with the essential natural processes of selection. For the long-term benefit of big game wildlife populations, supplemental feeding is an accident waiting to happen. When and where such feeding is done, it is undertaken only — if not expressly — for the interest of people, because the fed animals almost invariably will not benefit and very likely will be harmed by the practice.

The Wildlife Management Institute



Supplemental feeding of wild deer is harmful and can lead to bouts of severe diarrhea and dehydration, which could be deadly.

(Photo: Carol Vinzant)

