

# Is Feeding Deer Harmful?



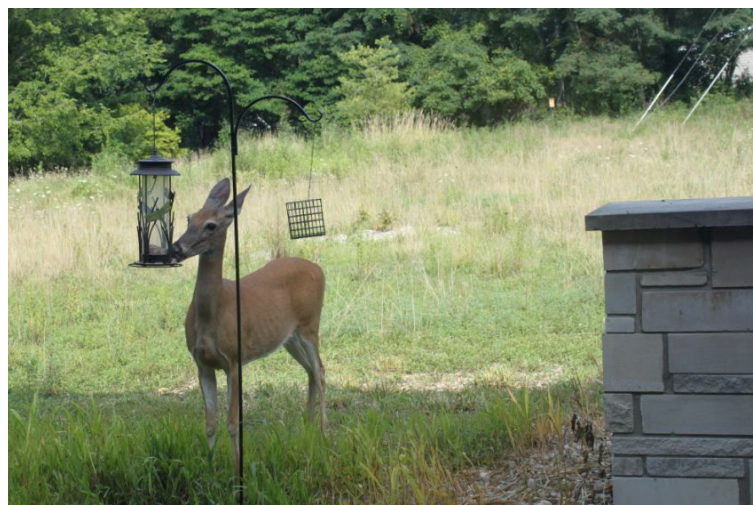
## Why Do People Feed Deer?

Putting out food for wildlife can feel very satisfying, coaxing even secretive species into view. Many people enjoy seeing white-tailed deer up close, and feel good about providing an easy meal, especially during times of the year 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 normally roam a wide area will spend most of their time near an artificial food source. In residential communities this often leads to conflicts as unwilling neighbors are forced to endure expensive damage to their 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: Falyn Owens)*

### Spreading Disease

Deer normally forage alone or in small groups, roaming to sample natural foods that are spread out across the landscape. Providing food handouts entices deer and other wildlife to congregate unnaturally in a small area. Contagious and deadly diseases such as Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), distemper, and rabies can

be spread through close contact, contaminated soil or food, and skirmishes over food (especially raccoons). Since CWD was detected in North Carolina in 2022, it is more important than ever to avoid attracting deer to feeding sites where infected saliva, urine, and feces can easily spread this fatal disease. Once CWD prions contaminate an area, disinfection is not possible. Don't let your yard become a hotspot for spreading disease; help deer stay healthy by encouraging them to forage naturally.



*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 hoof deformities. As ruminants, deer maintain a specific blend of microbes in their gut that breaks 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 can 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 )*

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