



Why You Should Not Feed Deer in Winter

(And what you should do instead.)

It is illegal to feed deer in the winter in New York and many other states. It offers no benefit to the size or health of deer herds and it can even be considered cruel. Feeding deer is not beneficial like feeding birds. Deer have evolved in special ways to help them survive the cold and snow and when people feed them they disrupt what nature has carefully put into place to give these animals their best chance of survival.

Deer spend summer and fall bulking up on the bounty of the woodlands, fields and (unfortunately) our gardens. It is then normal and even healthy for deer to lose 20% of their body weight during winter with adult deer getting as much as 40 percent of their daily energy from their fat tissue. This fat loss is not even dependent on how much food is available and has more to do with the way these animals have evolved to protect themselves from snow, icy winds and quick temperature drops. Deer instinctively do what is called “yarding”, this means they frequently seek cover under dense trees (usually conifers) and amongst low understory such as mountain laurel. By hunkering down in their little “yards” they conserve energy and have some natural protection against the elements. They do this as individuals and disperse far enough away from one another so they do not compete for the limited food supplies or over browse their habitat. When they do move around they

collectively create a series of trails through deep snow that can help them escape predators.

Healthy deer will have enough fat stores to survive in their yards and when deer do die in winter it is most often older or sick animals who could not bulk up enough fat for the long haul. This is nature's way of culling out the weakest of the species and leaving the strongest to continue breeding and raising young.

When people set up feeding stations, deer abandon their protective yards and instead concentrate near human abodes in anticipation of an easy meal. This inevitably results in deer unnaturally massing together which in turn leads to over browsing, attracting predators, increasing disease transmission and triggering aggression between animals that are not conditioned to live in close proximity during winter. Collisions with vehicles go up as deer will cross roads to go to the various homes that are feeding them instead of staying in their woodland shelters.

It gets even more complicated when you consider that deer have very special gut bacteria. The stomach bacteria of deer changes depending on the season. This has to do with their shift of diet from green leafy plants and flowers in summer to nuts and fruits in the fall and then to twigs, bark, buds and most importantly lichens in the winter. Eating lichens in winter is crucial to the survival of deer and their stomachs need to be in winter mode to take advantage of this special nutrition. The winter stomachs of deer have specifically evolved to turn their high fiber diet of woody browse into proteins. When deer have this transformation disrupted by well meaning people feeding them lettuce, corn, apples, hay - or basically anything not in their woodlands, it can trigger a slow form of starvation and various illnesses related to their bodies inability to switch back and forth in order to absorb proper nutrition. Deer can literally die of starvation with a full belly of human supplemented food. There's growing evidence that feeding deer an abnormal diet also makes it more likely that they will eat plants that are toxic to them such as rhododendron and mountain laurel, their stomachs are confused and they are seeking leafy greens from sources which they would not normally eat in any season.

And the last reason to not feed deer is there is growing evidence that feeding deer an unnatural diet in winter throws off their reproduction. Deer reproduction is influenced by their seasonal diets and body weight. The wrong diet can trigger them to have fawns being born too early when there is not enough young vegetation available to support the nursing mother or the newly browsing fawn and both can become stressed and die.



So what's a a person to do if they want to help deer over the winter? Answer: plant native forage that deer have evolved to eat and stay healthy consuming. No, don't let them eat your gardens, but rather protect your gardens that contain native species that feed birds with seeds and berries and let the birds spread these plants into the wild when they disperse the remains. If you have a natural woodland that deer travel through- plant oaks for acorns, hybrid chestnut, beechnuts, native persimmon and hickory that will help many animals survive the winter. You might have to protect new plants with some caging, but once established they these tough woodland species can survive some browsing. Don't just "clean the woods" of understory, it's not meant to look like an urban park. Instead, continuously remove invasives (barberry, burning bush, Asian honeysuckle) while encouraging evergreens, mountain laurel, witch hazel, young hardwoods and serviceberry that offer shelter and food to wildlife. Invasives outcompete our native species and when you remove them you make room for a great abundance of species that add to local biodiversity. By encouraging a balanced ecosystem we support animals the way nature intended and that makes coexistence easier for all of us.

(Sources for more information on this topic and from where most of this was compiled: NYS DEC, Maine's Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, William Cook of the Michigan State University Extension)