

God is My Co-Pruner (Garden Time in Vernonia): Clan Cervidae

By Tom Coughlin

Now that the fall harvest is here, it's time to look back on the fun we've had trying to grow things in Vernonia. Over the next several months, Tom Coughlin will be sharing some of the trials and tribulations he's experienced in his attempts to garden in the Upper Nehalem Valley, in this sometimes humorous, sometimes sad-but-true, monthly column.

About three years into living here, I surprised myself with my reaction to something I read in a *Ruralite*. Some guy's huge garden had been devastated by deer at the end of summer. They'd eaten just about everything good, all the stuff he'd had his eye on for months. Angry, the guy shot one. He let its carcass ripen a couple days, then chained it to his tractor (hopefully a John Deere, but I honestly don't remember) so he could drag it and its stench around the perimeter of his property. Round and round he went until the deer was all chunks and he was all smiles.

A few years prior, I would've thought that response was pretty over-the-top, if not outright crazy and gross. The first couple dozen times deer visited our mill shack yard, we'd call each other to the window in naïve delight. "Oh, look---little babies, too! Spots and everything." We'd shush each other so's not to frighten them away. Like a bunch of angels had just winged in.

How I'd changed. Reading about this guy dragging a dead one around by a chain like Achilles defiling Hector's corpse behind his chariot, I *laughed*. I thought it was brilliant and just and hilarious. I pictured the lip-curved, appalled looks on their stupid deer faces as they encountered the stink fence their comrade'd become and laughed out loud because, in the intervening years, I'd been trying to garden in Vernonia.

I'd dabbled at growing things previously, but for me, like a lot of people, it was the experience of homeownership that got me serious about it. Too bad, because if I had been more earnest earlier, I might've

recognized the challenges to making things grow in our shady, cool, bowl-within-a-bowl in the woods. Especially things you want to eat.

We'd bought a little place on a beautiful park-like acre, a stream cutting through it, several garden beds already established. One thing making it park-like was the trees ringing it on three sides. Wonderful to look at, we somehow didn't factor them into doing tree things like growing taller and casting more and more attractively dappled shade on everything we'd try to grow. Eventually there'd be no place on the property that got more than six and a half hours of direct sunlight a day. Years later, at a Master Gardener's Spring Sale, I overheard a conversation between one of the volunteers and a guy with a flat of tomato plants that led me to a realization.

***He raised an eyebrow and brought
his knuckles to his lips.
“You don’t---live in Vernonia, do you?”***

“No, don’t worry. Tomatoes are actually fairly easy to grow,” the volunteer assured the guy.

He explained their simple nutritional needs, how it was best to water them regularly but not overhead, and was all sunshine and botanical encouragement for several minutes before a cloud crossed his face.

He had a pained expression, like he'd really like to seal the deal by raving about how much more delicious homegrown tomatoes were, but was afraid he might've already spoken too soon. He raised an eyebrow and brought his knuckles to his lips.

"You don't---live in *Vernonia*, do you?"

Turns out the guy didn't, so the encouragement continued. But I did and it dawned on me: Dumbass, you've bought a shady lot in *Vernonia*.

I'll try to complain more about the lack of light later, but back to dappled deer. It seems ungrateful to say it, but most of the advice I've gotten concerning them has been baloney. Two things in particular not to waste your time on are Irish Spring and yellow rope. Supposedly, there's something about the manly smell of Irish Spring that deer don't like, too. Kinda makes sense since it does have a strong, clearly artificial fragrance and yet somewhere I have a photo of a crude tiny scale Stonehenge replica I once made of Irish Spring bars around a previously robust columbine---which deer had since reduced to a thin, sad rosette (Columbine, along with tulips, are on many Deer Resistant Plant Lists, and that's true as long as you're growing the former for its roots and the latter for its

leaves).

And while I've read that yellow startles cows, it doesn't seem to much bother deer. Our main vegetable garden is surrounded by a simple four-foot fence. Most authorities recommend twice that height, and yet in the 16 years we've gardened here, deer have gotten into it only three times; twice because I'd forgotten to close the gate. The only time the fence has been leapt, though, we had a yellow rope stretched along the top as per old timey instructions. I took it down and it's never happened since, though the rest of our yard has been regularly ravaged. Conclusive proof that a deer cannot jump a four-foot fence unless it has a yellow rope over it!

We tried blood meal, but it seemed to attract coyotes. Laying chicken wire on the ground did seem to be a barrier, as long as they couldn't walk around or jump across it, but it was a pain to move when I had to mow. Never did try cougar urine, a paintball gun, or a pit with stakes.

Besides our magic four-foot fence, there are two things that work so well that I wish I'd come across them a decade ago. One is a motion sensor hooked to an impact sprinkler that goes off for several seconds should a deer (or a party guest) walk within its range. "Scarecrow" is the most common brand. It's like having someone stand in your yard around the clock ready to scare away anything larger than a cat with a hose. Works great, but it can only cover so large an area, so you might need more than one, and at \$80 each, that can get spendy. Also, you can't use it in freezing weather, because the plastic parts will heave and break, so it's not much protection early and late in the season.

A simpler and probably more effective approach is to use a sprayable barrier like Liquid Fence. It's available at both hardware stores, and I would give up on gardening here without it. A deer might take one exploratory chomp out of something, but this stuff will turn their favorite feast into something they'll ignore. It's made from putrescent eggs, garlic, and soap, so why in the world wouldn't it? It does need to dry for about three hours to be effective for long, but then it's good for a solid two weeks.

That dry time hasn't been a problem this fantastically warm and dry growing season, but some years a three-hour window of dryness can be hard to find. Also, you can't spray it directly on anything you expect to eat, so you have to plan around that (by spraying the leaves, say, and not the fruit, or by putting your lettuce behind enchanted four-foot fencing). It's been a game changer.

So much so that I've since come back to enjoying seeing deer in the yard. Even so, I recently came across something in a history book I can't pretend not to understand. It seems frustration with deer goes back a long time in the United States---back before it was even called that.

It seems that the Wampanoag Indian Squanto also had rageful feelings about Clan Cervidae. Seems Squanto met with leaders of the early settlers and, taking pity on their hungry looks, gave this brief tutorial on feeding yourself in The New World:

“First, clear soil equal to three blankets. In the center---” the old peacemaker pointed tenderly at the ground with his pipe-stem--- “of that, place a large fish and atop that fish build a mound of soil. In that mound, plant the Sisters Corn, Squash, and Bean. Four seeds of each.”

“Why four?” they asked.

"Ah," said Squanto and drew on his pipe. "One for the Worm, one for the Crow. One to rot and one to grow."

The leaders nodded thoughtfully as Squanto took another long pull.

I'll switch to the language of the original account because it so vividly captures the moment:

Of a sudden, Squanto raised his face, and amazed were we all by the transformation. Now on his feet, stabbed he wildly with his pipe about---a sudden angry eye on every shrub and tree---and avowed, "Oh, and about a hundred more for the f#@%ing deer!"



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