Tree Damage from Deer Rubbing

Deer seriously damage young trees by rubbing their antlers against the sensitive bark.

Young, thin-barked trees and recently planted smaller trees are most susceptible to damage. This damage can be devastating to bark on trees that are usually less than a few inches in diameter.

Why do deer cause damage?

Two reasons. 1) Deer antlers are covered with a velvet coating as they grow. In early September this velvet begins to shed and deer often rub on springy small trees or shrub stems to hasten the removal of the velvet.

2) Much more significant damage is inflicted on the stems and trunks of small trees by male deer rubbing their velvet-free antlers to mark their territory. Glands in the head of the deer secrete chemical pheromones to establish dominance and attract the most desirable mates during the seasonal rut. The territorial marking starts around the time velvet is shed, in September, lessens after the rut or mating season in November to December, and may continue until the antlers fall off at the end of the mating season in January.

This rubbing can strip the bark off the lower 40" of the trunk. The trunk becomes disfigured and may be killed if enough bark is removed.

Tree protection

Starting this season all susceptible trees in the Fairfield Tree Planting Program will have a protective guard added when they are planted. This guard should remain on the tree for the next few years. It will allow air circulation around the bark and protect the soft bark of young trees from deer damage.

As the tree grows, the guard should provide at least an inch of free space to accommodate the trunk's expansion.

Please make sure that the protective guard for your tree remains intact. Should it get damaged or become tight, please let us know so it can be replaced. You may complete a service request online on the Town of Fairfield's website.

For more information on deer behavior, this article may be helpful:

https://www.outdoorlife.com/articles/hunting/2007/09/anatomy-rub-0

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