



## To Feed or Not To Feed? Oh, Deer!

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Humans know that winter is a hard time. They do their best to take extra care of their families, homes, animals, and neighbors. So what about our deer friends? They are outside. They look cold and hungry. They surely must need human help. Or do they?

Deer have evolved behavioral and physiological strategies to help them survive winter. They build up their fat reserves during the summer and fall. They lay low when snow is abundant, so they do not waste valuable calories. They create pathways through the woods so they can evade predators. They gather in small groups for warmth.

<http://extension.unh.edu>

Many people feed deer in winter with hay, corn, white cedar brush, vegetable scraps, or livestock pellets. Such feeding is done with good intentions, but even the best of intentions can have serious, negative impacts. These good intentions can go terribly wrong: more deer starve than would occur naturally, the land near the feeding station is degraded or destroyed, diseases are more likely to spread through the deer population, the youngest deer incur the greatest harm, predation increases, deer lose their wildness and become dependent on people, and more deer are killed in collisions with cars.

Feeding is a non-productive, short-term activity. What can landowners do to help the deer in the long term?

- Provide deer with opportunities to build their fat reserves before winter.
- Protect the deer's natural habitat:
  - Leave a variety of trees on the property for browse: beeches, white cedars, hemlocks, oaks, fruiting trees and shrubs.
  - Let white cedars grow naturally: do not prune them. Over its long lifetime, a white cedar's natural litterfall can feed many deer for many years and its boughs and branches provide shelter. A cut cedar feeds a herd for one day.
  - Perform light timber management activities in winter when the deer need the browse most.
  - Distribute browse areas and winter cover areas throughout the property: discourage concentrating resources. Small herds are desirable, but large gatherings of deer cause problems both to the deer themselves and to the landscape.

Please do not feed the deer. If you have already started, do not stop until spring greens are available. Spread only high quality food (such as livestock pellets) in small amounts far from roads and houses. Discourage large herds and do not allow a few individual deer to monopolize the food. Next year, please do not feed the deer.

For more information about feeding deer, see

[http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Newsroom/News\\_2004/News\\_2004\\_Q1/Dont\\_feed\\_deer\\_010504.htm](http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/Newsroom/News_2004/News_2004_Q1/Dont_feed_deer_010504.htm), [http://www.maine.gov/ifw/wildlife/species/deer/feeding\\_deer.htm](http://www.maine.gov/ifw/wildlife/species/deer/feeding_deer.htm).