

'Deer doctor' to diagnose Grand Haven

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The Defenders of Urban Wildlife hope the "deer doctor" coming to Grand Haven brings both sides of the deer overpopulation debate together to solve the problem.



Garden consultant and author Sandy Baker speaks in communities across the country with similar issues. She shows people how to "deer proof" their gardens by concentrating on deer behavior.

"Once people grasp that, it demystifies the whole process," said Baker, who lives in Rochester, N.Y. "I've been around the country enough to see patterns that are established — and if we can address garden issues early on, the population will stabilize."

Baker will host a public seminar at the Grand Haven Community Center, 421 Columbus Ave., at 7 p.m. Tuesday. The Defenders of Urban Wildlife is paying \$1,500 for Baker's visit, a cost they hope to offset with suggested donations of \$3 per person or \$5 for groups of two at the seminar. Earlier in the day, Baker will work with Michigan State University Extension master gardeners in their educational garden at the Grand Haven Memorial Airport off Comstock Street. She will also visit a resident's garden and the Defenders Deer Trial Garden at 1715 Gladys Ave.



Defenders of Urban Wildlife member Sue Rehm-Westoff said Baker comes highly recommended from communities with similar problems.

"She's just supposed to be the best, as far as bringing healing to communities, as well as bringing a wealth of garden knowledge," Rehm-Westoff said.

Grand Haven isn't supporting the event financially, but the city's Web site links to information on Baker and the seminar.

"We think it's tremendous that this expert is coming here to spread that information," City Manager Pat McGinnis said. "It's probably going to be valuable information."

Deer population control has been a divisive issue in Grand Haven — especially during the past year. Gardeners say they're losing both valuable and sentimental gardens, and wildlife lovers believe enough effort hasn't been put toward solutions besides controlled deer shootings.

The issue boiled over this winter when City Council approved deer culls on Harbor Island and at Lake Forest Cemetery. And on Tuesday, a Grand Haven man was charged with poaching deer in the city.

The Defenders group spoke out against the deer culls, and are again trying to be part of the solution.



"While we objected to the last cull because we didn't feel deer task force recommendations were followed, it's a misconception that we were (at the cemetery) to interrupt the hunt," Rehm-Westoff said.

Nancy Nagtzaam, another member of the Defenders group, said the Deer Trial Garden is proof gardening is possible with the current deer population. She said plants like coreopsis, columbine, lavender and two fern species have grown with deer routinely tramping through the garden.

Rehm-Westoff said Baker's visit will be beneficial to everyone interested in protecting both deer and gardens.

"If people can figure out how to garden in areas where deer browse, this problem basically goes away," Rehm-Westoff said.

One of the lessons Baker hopes to bring to Grand Haven revolves around the concept of compensatory rebound. When applied to deer, compensatory rebound means the population will

stabilize based on a habitat's carrying capacity. So if deer are killed, the rest of the population will birth more deer and start reproducing as early as age 1.

The easiest way to solve the deer problem, Baker said, is to learn how to live with the deer at their natural population capacity. By teaching gardeners this and other traits about the deer population, Baker said she's able to address the issue without diving into the controversy.

"The information I'm presenting is effective for anybody's garden — it doesn't matter what their belief system is," she said. "I can tell, it is good information."

On the Net:

<http://defendurbanwildlife.org>