

Gardening with Dogs

Throughout the year our yards and gardens suffer from drought, heat, disease, insect and animal pests. Although the rabbits, newly germinated oak trees and squirrels have caused considerable disruption in my yard and gardens, I also fight the furry creatures that reside in my home. Currently, my plants suffer from one primary culprit—dogs. Between my 11-year-old, chocolate lab and my 2-year-old mutt, my yard has seen better days.

Digging, squirrel patrolling and playing are all activities that trample flowers and tear up my yard. It has led me to ponder a larger issue, is it possible to have a beautiful, dog friendly yard? Can my yard be safe and fun for my dogs while also providing me enjoyment and beauty?

In our gardens, safety for our pets is the highest priority. Avoiding adding potential toxins to your yard is the first obstacle. Cocoa mulch can cause reactions in dogs and cats. It is best to avoid these mulches for areas that animals will be able to access. Rubber and colored mulches may also contain chemicals that have the potential to be dangerous. Wood, dye-free, mulches are the safest option for pets.

Fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides can all be potentially fatal to your pets. Storage of these chemicals should be up on a high shelf with lids tightly secured. The best precaution for these chemicals and others, is to read the label entirely and consult with your veterinarian, or the chemical company with concerns. Rain can affect how the chemicals are absorbed into soil so take extra precautions if heavy rain follows a chemical application.

Compost, fish emulsion, kelp and worm castings are safer alternatives to chemical fertilizers. While safer, these products may have an odor that your dog finds appealing. Watch your pets after applying anything new to your yard. They may eat or roll in something that they think smells good. Compost bin lids should also be tightly fastened. While these safer alternatives may not be toxic, many things may upset dog's stomachs and if you've smelled fish emulsion you know enough to not allow your dog to roll in it!

The *plants* in your yard and garden can also present a hazard for your pets. Tulips, daffodils, azalea, rhododendron, castor bean, yew, crocus, chrysanthemum, mushrooms, English ivy and lilies can all be toxic to pets. Individual pets may have allergic reactions to non-toxic plants so the safest option is to discourage animals from consuming anything in your yard that isn't intended for them. If you think your pet has consumed something harmful, our Extension Master Gardeners can assist with identifying the plant in question, but you should *always* consult your veterinarian first, especially in emergency situations.

After you've made the garden safe for your pets, begin to look at how to keep your garden safe *from* your pets. As with areas of your home, the yard requires monitoring, training and designated pet sections. When we first got our youngest dog, she was not

allowed in closets as she seemed to think our shoes were her personal chew toys. In that same way, I have to restrict her from areas of the yard. My prized herb spiral is not a toilet. The spiral is now protected with two large flower containers on one side and a small table and chairs on the other. As you garden, train your pets as you do inside. If you can teach them to stay off the couch, you can train them to stay out of flower beds. Small fences and borders help define the spaces, as do larger plants.

In the same way you do indoors, give your pets a place to play and carry out their natural functions. A gravel or mulched area serves as an excellent place for your dog to do its business. Often dogs prefer a vertical marker (think fire hydrant) to “aim” for. A statue, large rock or tall planter (tall enough that they cannot hit the plants) would all serve the purpose. Because high levels of nitrogen (found in dog urine) can kill large portions of your lawn, keep the designated “business” area desirable for your pet. Clean it up daily and replace saturated mulch regularly. Make sure the area is big enough for the pets you have and reward them with treats and praise when they use it.

If your dog is a digger, consider adding a small spot for this as well. Although this may not be as visually appealing as other parts of your yard, it’s better to have one area for the task than to constantly re-plant and replace plants that have been disturbed by the activity. A sand box, or sand and soil mix, with toys buried inside should appeal to your digger. As with the business area, praise when they use it for its purpose and discourage digging outside of the designated section.

Most dogs love nothing more than to patrol their territory and defend it from would be invaders. This is often why you see areas just inside fences with well-worn dirt paths. A path, made of mulch, pavers, gravel or walkable groundcovers, helps guide dogs to areas where they can patrol. If you want to discourage them from the fence line you may have to plant along the fence while also providing a path leading them elsewhere.

Plants can also serve as a way to keep pets out of certain areas of the yard. Closely planted shrubs may act as a wall keeping pets on one side. Watch for them to push through the hedge line and correct this behavior as repeated trips may form a hole in your hedge.

Although challenging, a yard can have both dogs and beauty. Pets and gardening both require planning, patience and a healthy dose of reality. Some plants will be trampled, dug up and marked, but in the end, you can create a space that’s enjoyable for you and your pets.