

Throughout the year our yards may suffer from one ailment more than others. Many of us are still seeing drought stress from everything except the weeds. Currently, in my yard, my plants suffer from one primary culprit—dogs. Between my 9 year-old, 90-pound chocolate lab and my new 11-month old mutt puppy, my yard has seen better days. The extreme shade and drainage issues were already cause for concern. Now, I'm wondering if I can get anything to grow at all. With the digging, squirrel patrolling, running that involves flinging clods of dirt as they go and their natural by-products, both dogs are putting my plants, and my patience to the test. 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?

Personally, safety for my pets is my 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 the 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. I say that knowing fulling that my lab will graze on various weeds (he prefers yellow nutsedge) and that it appears my new puppy enjoys eating the locust and moths that she can snatch out of the air. I cannot imagine that either of these habits are particularly healthy. 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, 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. Our new puppy isn't allowed in closets; she seems to think shoes are 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. That was a lesson I had to teach my puppy. The spiral is now protected with two large flower containers on one side and

a small table and chairs on the other. She could still squeeze and get in, but these barriers slow her down enough that she has relinquished the space back to me. 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 this area desirable for your pet. Clean up piles 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 invaders. For most of us these invaders are squirrels, bunnies and the occasional alley cat. This is often why you see areas just inside fences with well-worn dirt paths. Dogs may also enjoy conversing with their neighbors and barking at passerby’s. A path, made of mulch, pavers, gravel or walkable groundcovers, helps guide dogs to 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 line 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.