

## Creating a Dog-Friendly Yard

When you plant your next garden, consider 'dog-scaping' your yard instead of just landscaping. With careful attention to creating areas your dog will enjoy, your backyard can become an inviting sanctuary for your pet.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- "Dog-scaping" is a term coined by landscape designer Maureen Gilmer, who wrote the book, "The Dog-Scaped Yard"
- Plant a meadow in your yard, complete with tall grasses and perennials, where your dog can investigate
- You can also plant low troughs of wheat grass for your dog to nibble on, which may discourage him from chewing on your ornamental flowers and plants
- By planting flea-repelling herbs, you can discourage these pests from taking up residence in your yard — and on your dog
- A large piece of driftwood or an upright log can be added as a designated marking spot
- For dogs that like to dig, teaching him to use a designated digging spot where digging is acceptable can save your gardens
- An outdoor sanctuary for your pet must be free of hazards such as lawn chemicals, cocoa bean mulch and poisonous plants

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When you're thinking of the next best thing to make your backyard your sanctuary, forget landscaping — bring in "dog-scaping" instead! It's a term coined by landscape designer Maureen Gilmer, who wrote the book, "The Dog-Scaped Yard." "Nobody speaks to Fido when it comes to the backyard landscape. Yet he spends more time there than anyone else in the family," Gilmer wrote in the Daily Journal.<sup>1</sup>

For starters, your yard should be a safe and secure place for your dog to explore, so install fencing as necessary to give your pup room to roam. If you have grass, you'll want to avoid using lawn chemicals, which are linked to cancer in dogs. Better yet, go beyond grass to create a rich environment for your dog to explore.

Gilmer recommends planting a meadow in your yard, complete with tall grasses and perennials, where your dog can investigate. You can even plant low troughs of wheat grass for your dog to nibble on, which may discourage him from chewing on your ornamental flowers and plants. Some dogs also enjoy rose hips from *Rosa rugosa* plants.<sup>2</sup>

"Dirt-cheap organic seed for wheat and oats can be found in the bread-making section of the health food store," Gilmer wrote.<sup>3</sup> Careful attention to the plants in your yard also contributes to creating the perfect dog-friendly environment.

## Plant Flea-Repelling Herbs

Many herbs were once known as "fleabane" because they could repel fleas. By planting a fleabane garden, you can discourage these pests from taking up residence in your yard — and on your dog. "When my dog Dot rubs against them I can smell the aromatic oils on her fur," Gilmer noted.<sup>4</sup> You can even dry the plants and add them to your dog's bedding for a natural flea repellent. Some good options include:

- Pennyroyal (*menta pulegium*)
- Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthum*)
- Tansy (*tanacetum vulgare*)
- Fleawort (*Erigeron canadense*)
- Rosemary (*rosemarinus officinalis*)
- Sweet bay (*laurus nobilis*)
- Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus*)

When choosing the best locations for your herbs and flowers, consider keeping about 18 inches around the border of your yard free from plants. Since dogs tend to walk around the boundary of their territory regularly, any plants on this trail may get trampled.<sup>5</sup>

## Provide Thoughtful Areas for Your Dog

Dogs love to dig, but if your dog has turned into a problem digger, it could be because he's trying to uncover a cool spot to lie in. Gilmer recommends being proactive by digging a shallow pit where your dog can comfortably fit, in a shady spot. Line it with sand (to prevent it from turning into a mud pit) and keep it damp. In warm weather, your dog can retreat to this cooling off spot whenever he wants to cool off.<sup>6</sup>

A plastic kiddie pool is also a welcome addition for dogs in the summer. If you want to incorporate it into the landscape, dig out an area and set it into the ground like an in-ground pool.

Another thoughtful addition is a marking post, where your dog can mark his territory to his heart's content, similar to how he may mark a fire hydrant or lamp post when you're out for a walk. A large piece of driftwood or an upright log will work well for this purpose. You can also use logs to form borders along planted areas where you'd rather your dog stay out off.

Be sure there are plenty of pathways for your dog to run through as well. Dogs will create their own paths if you let them. Turn their walkways into proper paths by widening them to three feet. If you like, you can also create a designated area in your yard for your dog to relieve himself.

When planting flowerbeds, put sturdier plants such as ornamental grasses at the edge while putting more fragile plants in the middle, where your dog is less likely to run over them. Choose plants that are sturdy but soft, without thorns or spines that could scrape your pet.

A doggy play area will also be much appreciated by your pup. You can define an area using logs or stone blocks, then collect a few of your dog's favorite toys for him to discover. For dogs that like to dig, teaching him that this is his play spot where digging is acceptable can save your gardens. Many diggers appreciate a sand pit or designated dig spot

where they can express this natural behavior.

## Consider a Sensory Garden

I first heard of intentionally creating a customized **sensory garden** for dogs when Steve Hill discussed several he had designed during a Zoopharmacognosy class I took with Caroline Ingraham.

Behaviorist Ray Hobbs, who runs Canine Harmony Wales, is passionate about sensory gardens because they provide environmental enrichment, activate natural instincts and build confidence. "Sensory gardens are an opportunity for dogs to use their natural canine skills," he explained. "Dogs are naturally curious, and a sensory garden can give them that mental stimulation."

## Keeping Your Yard Pet-Safe

An outdoor sanctuary for your pet must be free of hazards that could make him sick. This includes cocoa bean mulch, which contains the chemical compounds theobromine and caffeine, which are highly toxic to dogs and can be fatal. Certain plants can also be poisonous to pets.

Be sure to keep your yard clear of the following poisonous plants, compiled by the Pet Poison Helpline, to create a backyard that's both fun and safe for your pet:<sup>7</sup>

- **Autumn Crocus** — The Autumn Crocus is highly toxic and can cause severe vomiting, gastrointestinal bleeding, liver and kidney damage, and respiratory failure.
- **Oleander** — Oleander leaves and flowers are extremely toxic if ingested and can cause severe vomiting, slow heart rate and may even cause death.
- **Azalea** — Eating even a few azalea leaves can result in vomiting, diarrhea and excessive drooling; without immediate veterinary attention, the pet could fall into a coma and possibly die.
- **Dieffenbachia** — Dieffenbachia can cause intense oral irritation, drooling, nausea, vomiting and difficulty swallowing if ingested.
- **Cyclamen** — The roots of this seasonal flowering plant are especially dangerous to pets. If ingested, cyclamen can cause severe vomiting and even death.
- **Daffodils** — Ingestion of the bulb, plant or flower can cause severe vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, and even possible cardiac arrhythmias or respiratory depression.
- **Kalanchoe** — This popular flowering succulent plant can cause vomiting, diarrhea and heart arrhythmias if ingested by pets.
- **Lily of the Valley** — Symptoms include vomiting, diarrhea, drop in heart rate, severe cardiac arrhythmias, and possibly seizures.
- **Lilies** — The more dangerous, potentially fatal lilies are true lilies, including Tiger, Day, Asiatic, Easter and Japanese Show lilies – all of which are highly toxic to cats. Even small ingestions (such as 2-3 petals or leaves) can result in severe kidney failure.
- **Sago Palm** — If ingested, the leaves and seeds can cause vomiting, bloody stools, damage to the stomach lining, severe liver failure and, in some cases, death.

## Sources and References

<sup>1, 3, 4</sup> [Daily Journal February 10-11, 2007](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The Bark March 2010](#)

<sup>5, 6</sup> [Landscaping Network, Dog Destroying Your Garden?](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Pet Poison Helpline](#)

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