

Pet Friendly Gardens

By Jenni Hopkins, Fairfax Master Gardener

Many of us enjoy our extended family furry friends in our lives and especially enjoy their time with us in our gardens. Just because we bring home a dog or a cat doesn't mean that we have to bar them from the gardens that we love. We can design our gardens with the goal of keeping our animal companions safe while preventing them from destroying our garden space. Here are some considerations for planning and designing a pet friendly garden.

Establish boundaries

Dogs will be able to understand boundaries within the garden with proper training of basic commands.

Cats are not as likely to be trained but with good plant selection and some borders in place, cats can be an integral part of the garden. A good tool in deterring our pets from digging or entering into an area where we do not want them is to consider planting strong smelling plants such as rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*), sage (*Salvia officinalis*) and lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*).

Raised beds, short or taller fences and containers can show the parameters within the garden. By using the same materials for these borders, your dog should be able to recognize the boundaries. If perimeter fencing is installed, make sure to leave a 2- to 3-foot empty border between the fence and the planting areas. Most pets enjoy patrolling their turf. If your space is large enough, you may want to leave a part of the garden as grass where a dog can run and play. Row covers and hoop houses in vegetable gardens will also deter unwanted activity there.

Location is extremely important for this garden. You will need a space that provides both sun and shade and also has a good water source. Most dogs have few sweat glands and are especially sensitive to heat. If there is a shady spot in the garden, it will help provide protection from the sun and heat. It is also recommended to have a good water source for your pets. It can be as simple as a water bowl with fresh water or some have opted for a kiddie play pool to aid in their pet's comfort. Make sure that the water is clean to prevent bacteria and algae growth, which would be harmful to our pets.

Make pathways to help train your pet

Your pet needs to know where it should or shouldn't be in the garden. Use paw friendly materials such as mulch, flagstones or small, smooth gravel such as pea gravel. When considering a mulch path, do not use cocoa bean mulch, which is highly toxic to pets. Pine, cedar and hemlock mulches are considered some of the safest to use in the garden. Another option would be the use of the steppable plants for the pathways. These are creeping perennials and ground covers that tolerate foot traffic, do not need to be mowed and once established, require less water than the typical lawn varieties.



photo: Michigan State University

Create an area for elimination

The idea is to train your pet to use this area for their bathroom. Cats can be deterred from defecating in your flower beds by using a motion activated sprinkler or by covering the soil with an uncomfortable material such as chicken wire. Another solution for cats would be to make a cat sandbox surrounded by catnip plants (*Nepeta cataria*) to help attract them to the sand litterbox. This will need to be cleaned periodically.

It is also recommended to create an area for dogs to eliminate and train them to use this area to help keep them out of your garden beds. You can give them a vertical structure such as a large boulder, tall planter or statue to use as a fire hydrant as needed in a chosen area.

Build a dig pit for your dog

Dogs love to dig naturally so if space allows create a pit filled with sand and bury toys, bones or treats just under the surface. Praise your dog for digging in this special area.

Create densely planted areas to protect tender plants. Shield delicate vegetation with hardy shrubs and sturdy perennials. More mature plants are desired here in case a branch is torn off while the pets are in the space. They will be able to recover faster.

Pet safe plants are obviously a must. When planting for cats, catnip (*Nepeta*), orchard grass (*Dactylis glomerata*), pumpkin (*Cucurbita moschata*), green beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) and sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus* L.) help to create a safe, fun and interactive space with many shady areas for protection and for preparing to pounce. Plants considered safe for dogs include green beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*), blueberries (*Vaccinium cyanococcus*), raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*), strawberries (*Fragaria x ananassa*) and barley grass (*Hordeum vulgare*), all eaten in small quantities.

If planting herbs, incorporate those in the following list, all of which are high in antioxidants and safe for dogs to consume if you wanted to add small quantities to their food or treats. Dandelion greens (*Taraxacum officinale*) are a natural source of vitamins A, C, K, D and B in their stems and leaves. Rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*) acts as an iron-rich antioxidant. Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) is often used as a breath freshener in dog dental treats but be aware that while curly leaf parsley is good, spring parsley (*Cymopterus terebinthinus*) can be toxic. Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) has antioxidant, antiviral and antimicrobial properties. Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) is believed to be antifungal and antibacterial.

Plants to avoid are

- onion (*Allium cepa*)
- garlic (*Allium sativum*)
- potato (*Solanum tuberosum*)
- tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*) and any fruits with internal seeds and pits that contain toxic chemicals
- azalea, rhododendron, mountain laurel (*Ericaceae* spp.)
- lilies (*Lilium* spp.) and daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.) which can cause kidney failure in cats

Plants that contain cardiac glycosides (medicines for treating heart diseases)

- foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*)
- oleander (*Nerium oleander*)
- milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)
- star of Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*)
- burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*)

- grapes (*Vitis vinifera*)

Safe flowers to consider for the pet friendly garden are

- snapdragons (*Antirrhinum majus*)
- cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanus*)
- zinnias (*Zinnia elegans*)
- sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus* L.)
- marigolds (*Tagetes patula*)
- petunias (*Petunia x atkinsiana*)
- sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*)
- aster daisies (*Symphotrichum ericoides*)
- roses (*Rosaceae* genus)

Use of fertilizers and herbicides

When using fertilizers for the garden, stay away from blood meal products that can cause inflammation of the pancreas and if ingested by your dog, can create a hard mass to form in their stomach creating a possible intestinal obstruction. Some rose fertilizers contain organophosphate that can cause serious diseases in dogs. Herbicides are potentially less threatening because they are made to disrupt the growth of plants. However, GI side effects and lethargy are possible if a concentrated amount is consumed. It is also very important to block your pet's access to your compost bin. Moldy foods and plants can cause serious muscle tremors if consumed. Some acceptable fertilizers would be seaweed, fish emulsion and worm castings.

Helpful resources for planting for our gardens with our pets in mind are The Pet Poison Helpline and also ASPCA Animal Poison Control.

Although challenging, a yard can have both pets and beauty. Gardening and pets both require planning, patience, a healthy dose of reality and a good sense of humor. Some plants will be trampled, dug up and marked but ultimately you can create a space that is enjoyable for you and your furry four-legged friends, a beautiful space where you and your pet companions can safely live and play.

References

[Pet Friendly Gardens](#), Gentle Touch Animal Hospital, Denver, CO

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[Planting a Pet Friendly Garden](#), Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, New Zealand

[Pet Poison Helpline](#)

[ASPCA Animal Poison Control](#)