

MAKE YOUR BACKYARD DOG FRIENDLY

Creating a dog-friendly haven out back

By Maureen Gilmer

Feb. 5, 2007 — Nobody speaks for Fido when it comes to the backyard landscape. Yet he spends more time there than anyone else in the family.

What I call a K-9-conscious garden design blends amenities for you and your dog into a harmonious space. It also addresses the most common safety problems that can hurt your pooch and send your vet bill into the stratosphere.

Dogs are naturally mobile creatures, forever on the hunt for food, like their ancestors the wolves. When they are cooped up with nothing interesting or mysterious to explore, they adopt undesirable behaviors out of frustration and boredom. Planting a tall grass meadow with flowers is not only a beautiful, wildlife-friendly form of gardening, it gives your dog hours of investigatory pleasure every day. Sure, manicured lawns are great for Frisbee, but when you're at work that meadow becomes a primal bit of heaven for man's best friend.

If you live in the city and don't have room for a meadow, here's a good alternative. Wheat-grass juice is a big health drink for us, and it's just as good for dogs. They will naturally graze on it when they need the nutrients it contains, rather than browsing your flowerpots. Consider planting wheat grass in low, wide troughs. Use flat plastic under-the-bed storage boxes with holes drilled in the bottom for drainage. Fill the boxes with potting soil and sow with seed. Dirt-cheap organic seed for wheat and oats can be found in the bread-making section of the health-food store.

Since ancient times, herbs have been used to repel fleas in human dwellings. They'll also discourage fleas in the yard and in your dog's general hangout areas. If you grow enough of them you can cut the branches, dry and use them to stuff your dog's bed for a natural pesticide. Many herbs were once known as fleabane because they are so widely used for this purpose, and some may also discourage ticks.

Plant a fleabane garden, or incorporate fleabane plants around the garden. When my dog Dot rubs against them I can smell the aromatic oils on her fur, which not only discourages pests, it covers up dog smell with fragrance! I recommend *Mentha pulegium*, also known as pennyroyal. Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthum*) is also beautiful silvery gray plant and quite effective, too. Old-fashioned tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) is top of the list, as well. All are perennial. When you shop, insist on the botanical names to ensure you get the exact plant that repels fleas.

Keep in mind, too, that some plants and landscaping materials are very bad for dogs. Vets say that when dogs are bored they will chew on most anything, and when that something is toxic, you have a problem. Cocoa-bean mulch contains caffeine and hulls of nuts falling from trees are rich in tannin, so both can be highly toxic if chewed. These include domestic walnuts or wild hickory. A few of the many plants poisonous to dogs are castor bean, foxglove, pokeweed, buckeye and yew. The master list of dog-toxic plants can be found at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals website, www.aspc.org/toxicplants.

To create the ultimate K-9-conscious yard that looks great and works well for the entire family, download the information-packed free eBook, "The Dog-scaped Yard," at www.MoPlants.com. It will give you solid ideas for dog-centered amenities as well as the full list of good and bad plants. There's even a useful recipe for cayenne pepper spray to keep Fido out of your prized flowers.

Master gardener Maureen Gilmer, host of [Weekend Gardening](#), gives tips on creating the ultimate K-9-conscious yard.



A backyard prairie of tall grasses and perennials is an ideal dog habitat. (All photos by Maureen Gilmer)



Planting aromatic herbs in your dog's landscape helps discourage pests.



There's a lot more involved in adapting your yard to make it more appealing to you and your dog. Simply building a run and a doghouse far from the action isn't taking your dog's needs very seriously. Under those circumstances you'd be bored, too, and just might take up compulsive chewing or barking, too.

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