

# Creating a dog-safe yard — and protecting it from your pets

BY HELEN CAREFOOT

We love our dogs, and for those fortunate enough to have a yard, proper consideration of what's in the space can help make sure both dog and landscape bring joy for years to come. We spoke to animal experts and a landscape designer for advice.

## Protect your dog

Some plants can pose risks to dogs, especially when ingested. Risks from plants generally come from blockages in a dog's gastrointestinal tract or poisoning, which can be mild, causing an upset stomach; lead to serious conditions, such as kidney failure; or be fatal, said Tina Wismer, senior director of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) Animal Poison Control Center.

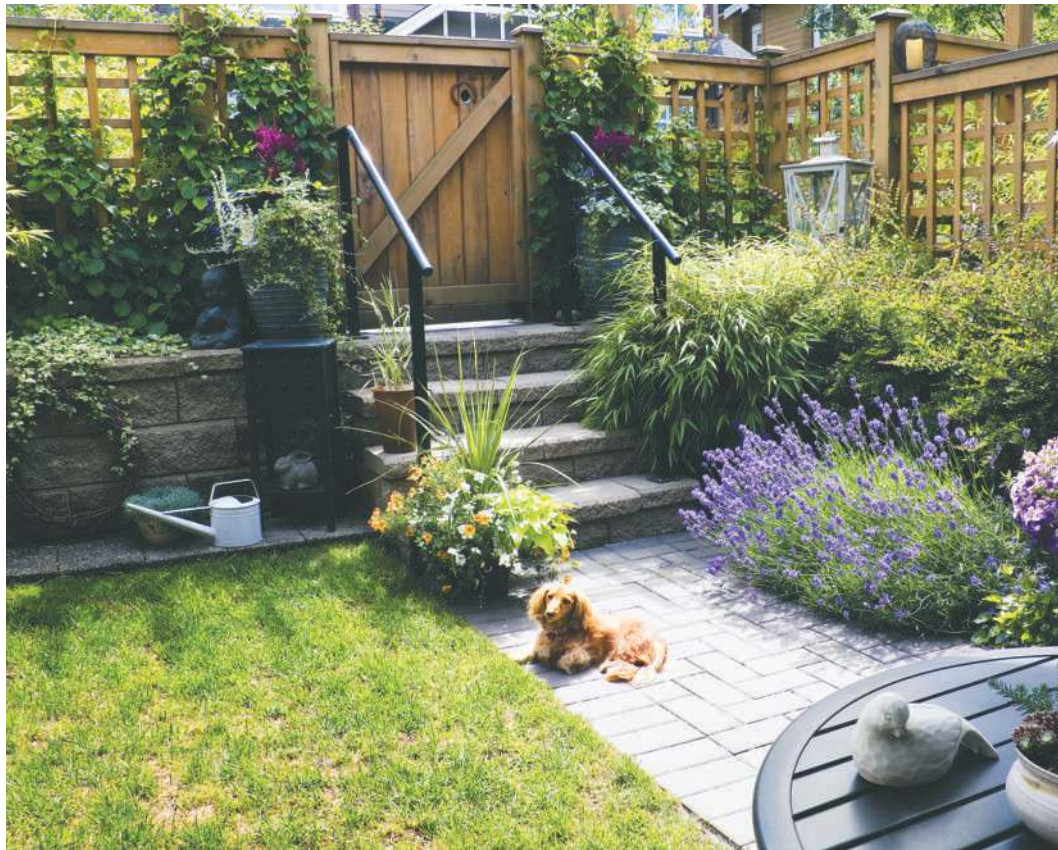
## Poisoning

In most cases, dogs would have to consume a lot of plant material for the effects to be fatal. "There are a lot of things that could be present that are potentially toxic, but the risk of really serious problems is pretty low," said Robert Poppenga, a professor of clinical veterinary toxicology at the University of California at Davis's School of Veterinary Medicine. If your dog has ingested something you're worried about, contact your veterinarian or call the ASPCA's control center at 888-426-4435.

For inexperienced and curious puppies, Wismer suggests using exercise pens or chicken wire until they outgrow the "everything-has-to-go-in-my-mouth phase."

**Plants of concern:** Wismer and Poppenga recommend that dog owners research specific plants before adding them to their yard; the ASPCA maintains a list of plants and their toxicity to dogs. Common plants to avoid include the sago palm, because it's toxic to dogs. "Some dogs will chew on the frond, but it's also very dangerous for them to eat the fruit, because it can cause liver failure," Wismer said. Some flowering plants, such as foxglove, oleander, lily of the valley and rhododendrons (such as azaleas), can lead to cardiac failure or cause diarrhea and vomiting if dogs ingest them.

**Ground cover:** It's normal for dogs to eat some grass, and this shouldn't cause issues in small amounts. Follow instructions for fertilizers and treatments, and heed warning labels. Cocoa bean mulch, which contains caffeine and theobromine, can cause vomiting and diarrhea, among other issues. Fertilizers that have chicken manure or bone meal are particularly enticing to



PHOTOS BY ISTOCK

**Some plants can pose risks to dogs, so it's important to consider what you're putting in your yard.**

dogs, Poppenga said, so use them only in areas your dog can't access. He also suggests keeping dogs inside after chemicals have been used in the yard, at least until the product has dried or been rinsed.

**Other parts of the yard:** Identify and remove mushrooms, because many of them can cause issues for dogs. The most life-threatening ones contain the toxin amanitin (common in compost that includes table scraps), which causes liver failure, Poppenga said. The smells of compost will tempt dogs, so he recommends using a covered bin. Regularly clean water features such as ponds and birdbaths to prevent the growth of algae, which can hurt dogs if ingested. Properly store yard tools, so they won't fall on or poke your dog.

## Stomach blockages

Dogs are "pretty indiscriminate about what they put in their mouths," Poppenga said, so owners should look out for things that could cause blockages in their stomach and intestines.

**Foxtail grasses:** These grasses are extremely dangerous to dogs. The seeds, or awns, contain sharp



barbs that can cause wounds and infections if inhaled or if they get caught in paws and fur. "If awns get in their nose, it can penetrate pretty much anywhere and can be difficult to resolve," Poppenga said. Don't let dogs sniff around these grasses; keep grass short and maintained, and look out for dry and long grasses on walks. Check and brush a dog's coat after time outside.

**Stone fruits:** The pits of stone fruits, such as cherries or plums, can cause blockages. Dogs don't grind their teeth to chew, so the small amount of cyanide in the pits and seeds isn't much of a worry in terms of poisoning, Wismer said. Watch for when fruit drops from trees. Cherry or olive pits are small enough for dogs to pass, Wismer said, but larger pits,

such as those from peaches or plums, could get stuck in a dog's digestive tract. Dogs might then vomit or have an upset stomach; owners should monitor them and contact their vet, who might suggest additional treatment.

**Less worrisome:** Acorns and sticks might be hard to digest but aren't cause for concern in small amounts. "One or two acorns probably isn't a big deal," Poppenga said.

## Protect your yard

Top yard concerns for dog owners include having grass that can withstand activity from active dogs and handling damage that dog urine can cause. **For clients who need a soft area for dogs or children to play, Julie Orr, founder of Julie Orr Landscape Design**

in the Bay Area, generally uses a blend of 90 percent fescue grass and 10 percent bluegrass.

Bunchgrasses, a broad category that includes sedges and eyelash or mosquito grass, can also stand up to repeated wear. "They come in all sorts of different sizes and shapes, and they're pretty forgiving," Orr said.

Dog urine strikes fear into the hearts of many lawn owners, because it contains ammonia, urea (which is high in nitrogen) and salts that "burn" grass and cause the telltale yellow spots. (Poppenga said dog poop generally isn't an issue for lawns or plants.) To avoid this, Wismer suggests keeping dogs well-hydrated and rinsing areas where they urinate with a hose quickly after. "Dilution is the best solution," she said. If being on alert with a hose isn't feasible, **Orr recommends timing sprinklers to run soon after a dog is let out: "If it's 6 a.m., then you need to set the sprinklers to run for 15 minutes at 6:30 a.m."**

It's possible to train a dog to not urinate on plants or the lawn, but this requires consistency and patience. Pick a spot, and build training to go there into the dog's routine. "If you're taking them to that spot in the morning and letting them pee there, usually they're going to pick up that habit and learn," said Scott Dancer, owner of the Dog Wizard DC, a dog-training and obedience company.

Dog urine can also wreak havoc on hardscapes such as decks and garden paths, so, if possible, choose nonporous materials that won't stain or absorb liquids and odors. Porcelain pavers are Orr's top choice for durable but easy-to-clean hardscapes. She also likes nonporous stone or composite decks. Gravelly areas make for good elimination spots, because the waste can flow through the rocks and into the soil.

## Include shade and water

Dogs need shade and water to keep themselves cool. Any hardscape in full sun warms up, especially composite decking and pavers. A tree, umbrella or other shade structure will do. Access to clean water is essential, especially if your dog will be in the yard for an extended time.

## Chat Thursday at 11 a.m.

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