

How to Plant a Dog-safe Garden

This is the time of year when many people look forward to spending free time outside, enhancing their surroundings with lush plants and flowers. As many pets enjoy being outside in the warm spring and summer months, too, some thought must be given to their safety in the lawn and garden. With a little careful planning, you and your pet can enjoy a safe and relaxing garden environment. Whether you're planning a large garden to feed the family or decorating a small space with hanging baskets and containers, here are a few factors to be considered.

Plant Selection

Plants and flowers are nature's attention getters. Their fragrance, appearance, and cool shade they create are natural attractants for you and your pet. Curiosity often leads pets to consume the flowers and foliage of ornamental plants, which can produce irritating and sometimes life threatening side effects. When planning your garden, select plants that are non-toxic if touched or consumed.

Plants for a Sunny Location

If the location of your garden gives you 4 or more hours of direct sunlight a day, you have a long list of annuals and perennials from which to choose. Annuals grow from seed and last one growing season. They are good choices for fast, instant color impact. Garden and discount centers will offer a wide variety of annual plants at economical prices. Perennials return year after year from growth at the roots, they are a little more expensive, but do not need to be planted every growing season. Most gardeners have their favorites and mix both types for the longest possible color show. Safe choices for sunny locations include:

Annuals

- Zinnia (Zinnia sp.)
- Snapdragons (Antirrhinum sp.)
- Cosmos (Cosmos sp.)
- Calendula (Callendula sp.)
- Petunia (Petunia sp.)

Perennial

- Bee Balm (Monarda sp.)
- Phlox (Phlox sp.)
- Roses (Rose sp.)
- Catmint/catnip (Nepeta sp.)
- Coneflowers (Echinacea purpura)

Plants for Partial Sun

If your garden receives less than 4 hours of direct sunlight a day, the following list of non-toxic annuals and perennials requires less sunlight.

Annuals

- Primrose(Primula sp.)
- Butterfly flower(Schianthus sp.)
- Spider flower (Cleome sp.)
- Nasturtium (Tropaeolum sp.)

Perennials

- Columbine(Aquilegia sp.)
- Coral Bells (Heuchera sp.)
- Turf Lilly (Liriope sp.)
- Goat's Beard (Aruncus dioicus)

Shade Gardens

A shade garden receives little to no direct sunlight, although the sun may filter through the trees for dappled light. Plant selection for these areas may include the following:

Annuals

- Begonia (Begonia sp.)
- Impatiens (Impatiens sp.)
- New Guinea Impatiens
- Violet (Viola sp.)
- Coleus (Coleus sp.)

Perennials

- Bugbane (Cimifuga racemosa)
- Yellow Corydalis (Corydalis lutea)
- Astilbe (Astilbe sp.)
- Queen of the Meadow (Filipendula ulmaria)

Vegetable Gardens

If your interest is vegetables, you'll need 4 or more hours of full sun for most plants. Keeping your pet out of the vegetable garden may be your biggest task, especially when plants are young and fragile. Some clearly visible fencing may help. Avoid hardware cloth as pets can become entangled. Motion detector sprinkler systems can be useful in keeping pets and wildlife out of newly planted areas, and are not harmful. Most vegetable plants do not pose toxicity problems with a few exceptions. Onions, chives and garlic, which a lot of pets do like, contain compounds that, if ingested, can cause anemia. The leafy part of the potato plant, and the green part of the potato skin contain compounds that are toxic if eaten in sufficient quantities. Fruits also contain toxic chemicals in their seeds/pits. Apple, plum, cherry, apricot and peach seeds/pits contain cyanide, which can cause fatal seizures.

The 10 Least Wanted

The following is a list of plants that is best to avoid altogether due to their toxic nature. It is not a comprehensive list, if you are considering any plant of which you are unsure; consult your local plant nursery.

1. Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*)
2. Oleander (*Nerium oleander*)
3. Morning Glory (*Ipomea* sp.)
4. Japanese Yew (*Taxus cuspidata*)
5. Jerusalem Cherry (*Solanum pseudocapsicum*)
6. Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*)
7. Nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*)
8. Lily of the Valley (*Convallaria majalis*)
9. Precatory Beans (*Arbus precatorius*)
10. Trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*)

Lawn and Garden Chemicals

It is very easy to reach for a chemical pesticide, fertilizer or fungicide when faced with a problem in the lawn or garden. Fortunately for the average home gardener, safer alternatives are available for most commonly encountered problems, reducing the risk of a toxic exposure for your pet. You would not think that your pet would have any reason to consume these products but sadly they do, either intentionally or inadvertently and these types of poisonings are all too common. Remember before applying any product to your lawn, vegetables, or ornamental plants to read the label and follow the manufacturer's instructions. Many of these products are designed to persist in the environment days to weeks after application, so a pet can have an exposure days to weeks after initial application.

Alternatives to Chemical Pesticides

If you notice damaging insects on your plants such as aphids, spider mites or thrips, these insects can be eliminated or reduced by a simple spray of water. These soft-bodied insects are easily dislodged. Adjust the nozzle of your hose so a firm spray will not harm your plants and wash them away. If you have only a few plants, use a good stream of water from your watering can and a little hand washing. It may take a day or two but an infestation can be cleared by no more than a good shower!

Soap and Water

If your insect problem is more serious, add a teaspoon of dish soap to a gallon of water and use it in a garden sprayer. The soap is an irritant to a lot of insects and can help break down the protective barriers of their external skeleton. There are commercial insecticidal soaps available that are less toxic than most chemical alternatives.

Compost

The "black gold" of the garden, recycled kitchen and yard waste can be combined to produce the best garden fertilizer at no cost and reduce the need for chemical fertilizers. It can be applied to the lawn and garden twice a year and it will replace the essential nutrients that growing plants and grasses require.

And Don't Forget

Sometimes we forget the simplest things! Put your pets inside when mowing the lawn. A lawn mower can make a projectile out of a stick or rock that can injure your pet. Paint your garden tools a bright color such as red or yellow so you can see them out in the yard. Many pets step or trip on sharp garden implements. Store your chemicals out of reach and in their original containers. Don't assume your pet will not be interested in consuming these products. If there is a toxic exposure or consumption, call your veterinarian immediately with the information from the product label. Keep your pets inside when applying any chemicals to the lawn or garden. With a little planning you and your pet can enjoy a safe and beautiful garden.