

Creating Dog-Friendly Spaces in Your Yard

If you enjoy having an inviting, beautiful yard, rest assured, dogs and lush outdoor spaces can co-exist with a little planning and effort. Here are some tips for creating canine- and human-friendly spaces in your yard for all to enjoy together.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many families with dogs give up the dream of having a beautiful yard to enjoy during the warmer months of the year, but the reality is dogs and lush outdoor spaces can co-exist
- The first thing you'll want to do is create dog-friendly spaces in your yard, such as a play area, water feature, perhaps a marking post, and if you're really thinking big, a sensory garden
- Once that's done, it's time to design space for humans while keeping your dog in mind, such as a walkway around the perimeter of your yard so your dog can patrol without damaging the landscaping

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published May 17, 2021.

If you have a dog, believe it or not, it's also possible to have an outdoor environment your whole family can enjoy during warm weather. Just imagine ... an inviting outdoor space and a dog who can spend time out there safely and happily without destroying all your hard work. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

With a little planning and effort, your furry family member can peacefully co-exist in a lush outdoor space that makes everyone happy. The following are a few suggestions.

Create a Canine-Friendly Space

1. **Build a play area** — Frame it with wood or iron fencing, or cement or stone blocks. The goal isn't to confine your dog to the area, but just to delineate it. Put down soil and perhaps some sand, and cover with leaves, wood or bark chips, or some other type of mulch (but not cocoa bean mulch).

To encourage your dog to hang out in her outdoor space, make sure she's watching you while you bury a favorite toy or a few yummy snacks in a treat-release toy just beneath the surface and invite her to find it. Bury a few more toys right beneath the surface while she's watching and let her dig those up as well.

Next, bury a couple of toys while your dog isn't around, then take her to the play area and challenge her to find them. Repeat this routine as often as necessary until she learns the area is hers. If she likes to dig, with any luck you've given her incentive to limit her digging to her play area.

2. **Add a water feature** — To help your dog stay cool on warm days and prevent him from digging in search of cool soil, create a cooling pit in your yard. Dig out a shallow area that's big enough for your dog to lie

comfortably in. Spread a thin layer of wet concrete in the depression as a liner. Before the concrete dries, drive a few screwdriver-size holes in the bottom to allow drainage.

Once the concrete is dry, cover it with about six inches of white playground sand. "Water" the sand to keep it damp during the warmer months of the year and chances are your dog will head straight there to cool off. As a bonus, when he gets up from his spot, the sand will simply drop off him as it dries.

Another option for helping your dog stay cool outdoors is a kiddie pool. Select a pool made of sturdy, molded plastic. The sides of the pool should be low enough that your dog can step in and out easily. Alternatively, you can build an "inground" pool by digging out an area to place the kiddie pool in so that only an inch or two at the top is exposed.

This can help protect the pool from damage and enhance the look of your outdoor space. The only downside to this design is the pool will be more difficult to empty. You'll have to bail it out, drain it with a siphon, or allow the water to evaporate.

3. **Install a marking post** — If your dog is male, you might want to include a marking post in his space so he can mark his territory when the urge strikes, 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 can work well for this purpose.
4. **Consider creating a sensory garden** — I first heard of customized **sensory gardens** for dogs when Steve Hill discussed several he had designed during a zoopharmacognosy class I took with Caroline Ingraham (click **here** for Caroline's Instagram interview about starting a sensory garden).

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."

Next, Create Human Space With Your Dog in Mind

5. **Design a walkway around the perimeter of your yard** — Dogs routinely patrol the boundaries of their territory, so it's wise not to plant anything around the perimeter of your yard. Instead, line your dog's pathway with greenery that feels good to puppy paws while also disguising worn areas along the fence line or edge of your yard.

You can use pine needles, leaves or other soft natural materials. Keep in mind that while stone, rocks or other hard surfaces are fine for human walkways, your dog will appreciate a softer surface.

If the pathway seems to be widening thanks to your dog's patrolling activity, consider placing ornamental fencing or some other barrier along the inside edge of the pathway to prevent her from creating a needlessly wide path that encroaches on the rest of your yard.

6. **Protect your plants** — Use raised beds built with wood, decorative brick, or stone for all your plants. This will prevent your dog from running through your vegetables, flowers, and greenery, or plopping down in the middle of them for a nap. Alternatively, you can use container gardens.

A third option is to build a simple fence around your garden. You can use wire mesh with steel posts. The

fence should be approximately 4 feet tall. Make sure to bury the mesh and posts deep enough so they remain secure.

7. **Plant a meadow** — Consider 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.
8. **Avoid toxic plants and chemicals** — When choosing what to grow in your garden, keep in mind that some plants are **toxic to pets**. Veggies you should avoid altogether or keep safely away from your dog include eggplant, tomato, potato, onions, and rhubarb. Plants that are potentially toxic include foxglove, deadly nightshade, and larkspur. Trees to avoid include almond and walnut trees, cherry trees, and trees that grow fruit that contains pits.

Also keep in mind that the insecticides, herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers many people apply in the spring to bring their lawns and gardens back to life contain chemicals that are dangerous for pets.

The **Espoma Company**, which makes natural and organic products for the lawn and garden industry, has a Safe Paws lawn campaign to help spread awareness about natural gardening solutions that keep pets healthy and safe outside. The company wants homeowners to transition their lawns from "fast food" to "healthy food."

The traditional method of lawn care spreads toxic pesticides over the entire lawn, posing considerable risk to pets, kids, and the environment. Synthetic fertilizers containing fast-acting chemicals and made with fossil fuels like natural gas and coal are another problem in conventional lawn care.

These chemicals can burn the grass and kill earthworms and beneficial organisms in the soil. Excess fertilizer can leach into nearby waterways, causing pollution and **harmful algae blooms**.

The focus of organic lawn care is to produce a healthy lawn and soil using natural organic fertilizers. An organic lawn has grass roots grown deep into the soil, which makes them less vulnerable to drought, weeds, insects, disease, and other stressors.

9. **Practice safe staking** — To stabilize plants or young trees with stakes, avoid using thin wires that your dog might not see as he's moving around your yard. Use strips of cloth instead, flags or ribbons tied to the wires, or rubber wire guards. Also, if you're planting young trees, especially if your dog is male, protect them in wire enclosures for the first two or three years.
10. **Manage urine burns and pet waste** — There are a couple of ways to deal with burn marks on your grass from dog urine. One way is to hose down the patch of grass as soon as your pet urinates. Alternatively, you can cover the area with about an inch of compost. Either method will help rebalance the soil pH and reduce urine burning.

Mostly likely, the root of this problem is your dog's **alkaline urine pH**. Dog urine with a pH above 7 will kill the grass. Grains in pet food are often the cause of elevated urine pH and eliminating them from your dog's diet can actually cause her urine to become a fertilizer instead of a grass killer. Additionally, most dogs are consuming kibble, which lacks moisture and can lead to highly concentrated, alkaline urine.

If your dog already has a specific potty spot in your yard, you're way ahead of the game. If the whole yard is her bathroom, consider training her to one area only. Scoop her poop as soon as you can after she goes.

Consider making your own **pet waste compost** to manage dog poop. This can be extremely helpful for people with large dogs or more than one dog.

Sources and References

[Bark March 2021 \(Archived\)](#)
