

Keeping a Dog-Healthy Lawn

A chemical-free lawn is good for the Earth and your dog.

Cheryl S. Smith

“Going green” is hot in the automotive world right now — easing environmental damage with hybrid electric cars, bio-diesel, and near-zero emissions. You can apply a similar concept to your dog-friendly landscape by using products and techniques to keep your lawn “clean green.”

Lawns soak up enormous amounts of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and water every year. According to the journal *Economic Geography*, suburban lawns and gardens receive far heavier pesticide applications per acre than agricultural acres in the United States.

Not only does this harm local birds and bees, it can be downright deadly for the family dog. A 2004 study at the Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine linked bladder cancer in Scottish Terriers to exposure to lawns treated with herbicides and insecticides.

Living without chemicals doesn't mean you have to live without your lawn. You can keep your green space green with time-tested organic care techniques.

Going organic means helping your lawn put down deep roots so it can be vigorously healthy. Weeds poke up when the lawn is in less than tiptop health. Using herbicides may kill the weeds temporarily, but it does nothing to resolve the underlying problem. Correct watering, mowing, and non-chemical fertilizing can keep your lawn looking good without endangering your dog or the environment.

Water needs to soak in to encourage good root growth. Frequent, shallow watering leads to shallow roots and a lawn susceptible to disease, pests, weeds, and even damage from your dogs running around. Water less frequently but deeply, soaking the grass root zone 4 to 6 inches below the surface. How long it takes to deliver an inch of water to that depth depends on your soil's composition.

You also need to mow properly to encourage a healthy lawn. Many homeowners let their lawns grow long and then take off too much when mowing. Cut no more than one-third of the above-surface grass. Leaving your lawn a bit taller will help keep the ground temperature down and conserve that all-important water.

Also keep your mower in good operating condition. Dull blades tear the grass and leave it vulnerable to pests and disease. Consider a mulching mower that chops lawn clippings into small bits and blows them down into the lawn to serve as a natural fertilizer.

Finally, there's fertilizing. Why use chemicals when all-natural compost works effectively? Sprinkle 12 to 1 inch of compost on your lawn in early spring. Then apply compost tea — water in which compost has been steeped — regularly throughout the growing season. Experienced with combining her own dogs and lawns, Susan Cruver, a landscape designer in Olalla, Wash., notes that this regular compost treatment reduces yellow spots from dog urine and even helps lawns resist damage from canine traffic.

If you'd rather not make your own compost at home, organic products now abound. Natural predators of grubs and other lawn pests, all-natural fertilizers, even organic weed-and-feed products are available at many nurseries and websites.

You'll know you're keeping your dog safe from harm, while also doing the environment a big green favor. Give it a try.

Cheryl S. Smith's book, "Dog Friendly Gardens, Garden Friendly Dogs" (Dogwise, 2003, \$19.95), focuses on combining dogs and gardens successfully. You can visit her website at www.writedog.com

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