

It's Easy Going Green – Even With a Dog

Simple steps to an eco-friendly lifestyle with your dog.

By Wendy Bedwell-Wilson; Illustrations by Thomas Kimball

It's easy being green – if you're a dog. Dogs don't drive, waste a lot of electricity or take frequent airplane rides. Dogs' primary carbon pawprints on the environment, or their use of carbon-emitting fossil fuels, is minimal, if any. Where dogs' environmental impact comes into play is in their secondary pawprints, or the carbon emissions produced in the manufacturing and use of products for them.

On average, dog owners use a lot of products for their furry friends. According to the 2007–2008 National Pet Owners Survey by the American Pet Products Association, a nonprofit pet-products trade organization in Greenwich, Conn., a dog owner will spend nearly \$2,000 on products and services for her pet this year, which includes everything from food, treats and toys to veterinary visits, grooming and boarding. Any of these products or services can impact the environment in their manufacturing process, fossil-fuel use and disposal.

The good news is that a growing group of product manufacturers are thinking “green,” according to Leslie May, pet-product marketing consultant and author of the blog, RaiseAGreenDog.com

“I've seen more environmentally friendly products for dogs out there,” May says. Her blog features a bevy of new green products every month. “I can't put them all on my site. I have to wait until the next month. And that's so encouraging and so exciting.”

Dog owners can now choose products that are easy on the environment, such as certified organic foods, collars made with sustainable fabrics, beds stuffed with recycled plastic and toys made with reclaimed cotton. By purchasing these products, you can reduce your carbon footprint – and your dog's carbon pawprint, says Stephanie Volo, president of Planet Dog, an environmentally friendly dog product manufacturer in Newcastle, Maine.

“Reducing your dog's carbon pawprint is a lot easier today than it was 10 years ago,” Volo says. “Designers and manufacturers in the pet industry are now, more than ever, using eco-friendly, all-natural, organic, recycled, and recyclable ingredients and materials in their products, such as cleanup bags, toys, beds, treats, food, leashes and collars, grooming products, bowls, and mats.”

While doing what you can for the environment, consider these tips and techniques to help reduce your pet's impact on our planet, too:

1. Feed organic

The lowest-impact diet for your pup is a homemade meal full of organic, locally grown ingredients. By using meats, grains and vegetables farmed in your community, you use less fuel to transport them, May says.

If you don't want to cook your dog's meals, you could supplement its kibble or canned diet with fresh fruits and vegetables. “Add organic vegetables, carrots and green beans,” May says. “Try fruits like blueberries and bananas, or organic yogurts and low-fat cottage cheese. Mix in some steamed vegetables, organic chicken or salmon.”

If you feed your dog a commercially made diet, choose one that's certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Pet foods that bear the USDA Organic seal are grown on chemical-free farmland, manufactured in facilities that avoid synthetic chemicals in their processing, and are inspected regularly to ensure separation of organic and non-organic materials (such as chemical fertilizer).

“We've seen a growing trend toward natural pet food as consumers demand products that are free of synthetic ingredients,” says Randy Schwalke, president of Blue Seal Feeds, which manufactures natural foods for dogs in Londonderry, N.H. “The demand in the last couple of years seems to be for organic pet foods. Consumers want pesticide-, hormone- and GMO [genetically modified organism]-free products for themselves, for their companion animals and for the environment.”

2. Enjoy zero-carbon activities with your pup

Rather than drive to your local dog park or the beach, consider walking to the store, strolling around your

neighborhood or tossing your dog's favorite ball for fun. May enlists her dog's help when gardening. "Gracie loves to help me plant in the backyard," she says. "She digs the hole and I put the plant in. And then I have to try and keep her from pulling it back out!"

Like many people, May plans her errands to keep her driving – and her carbon emissions – to a minimum. On their way home from agility practice, for instance, May and her dogs stop by the local market for produce and run into the pet-supply store.

3. Choose toys made from sustainable or recycled materials

For a carbon-neutral impact on the environment, you can make your own dog toys by braiding old socks, knotting up old T-shirts and tying together old towels. May says these homemade toys are her dogs' favorites. "The lowest carbon-pawprint toy is something you make yourself," she says. "I wrote a post not too long ago about how an old cotton towel became the most favorite tug toy for my dogs."

Toy makers have also jumped on the green bandwagon, and more are designing toys made with sustainable materials, such as hemp, bamboo and phthalate-free rubber. (Phthalates are chemicals added to plastic and rubber toys to make them flexible and pliable.) They're stuffed with reclaimed cotton and colored with all-natural vegetable dyes. They're safer for the dogs and they're healthier for the environment, says Bob Vetere, president of the APPA.

"Toy makers are learning what can be done with sustainable ingredients, and they're starting to adopt them in their manufacturing processes," Vetere says. "It's still in its growing stages, but in the long run, it's going to make a significant impact."

4. Waste not, want not

For many dog owners, picking up their dogs' waste typically involves grabbing the mess with a reused plastic grocery bag. Recycling those bags is better than tossing them in the trash, but they can take decades, if not centuries, to decompose in the landfill. Biodegradable bags have come to the rescue.

Sold commercially, these bags are designed to break down in a fraction of the time of typical grocery bags. They're often made from recycled plastic or corn, and laced with naturally occurring microorganisms that speed the breakdown of the plastic's carbon chains, says Dean Cox, national broker and business manager for Perf Go Green Holdings, a bio-degradable plastics manufacturer in New York.

"When dog owners are looking for pick-up bags, they should look for ones that are biodegradable," he says. "Once exposed to the environment, they'll immediately start breaking down, leaving behind harmless carbon dioxide, water and biomass when exposed to natural elements."

In your own yard, consider using a pooper-scooper or an old-fashioned shovel and bucket instead of plastic bags, May says. Or invest in a composter designed to use worms to break down your dog's doo into a dynamite fertilizer – a process called vermicomposting.

"A couple of companies sell doo composters," May says. "You put the worms in, you put the doo in, and the worms eat the doo and make their own doo. Worm castings are one of the best fertilizers available. What goes in is what comes out: You feed your dog a good diet and good fertilizer comes out."

5. Plant a tree for your pup

What could be a better way to offset your pup's carbon pawprint than to plant a tree? You can find a spot in your yard, at your local dog park or through one of many companies that will plant a tree in your dog's name.

"With a company called Tree Givers, you can purchase a tree, and they plant it in memory of a person or pet," May says. "During the holidays, NaturalPet.com has a tree program for a charity. Planting any green stuff you can is just wonderful."

6. Dress to the alternative K9s

If you dress your dog, consider buying clothing made with alternative yarns and fibers, such as soy, hemp, bamboo, corn fiber or recycled plastic bottles. The Organic Trade Association, a Greenfield, Mass.-based business association focused on North America's organic business community, reports that organic-fiber linens and clothing represent one of the fastest-growing non-food categories in the industry in 2006, showing a 26.9 percent increase, according to the OTA's 2007 Manufacturer Survey.

With all the choices available, you can easily find clothing made with organic, sustainable fabrics, such as bamboo or

hemp, or reclaimed cottons or wools. Look for non-toxic, natural-based dyes, and reused buttons and closures.

7. Buy leashes and collars made from sustainable or reclaimed materials

Rather than reaching for a nylon, acrylic or plastic collar, consider neckwear and leads made from sustainable hemp or bamboo. The materials are easy to grow, require little or no pesticides and are naturally odor-resistant, says Sean Ryan, vice president of marketing for Wagging Green, a dog and cat collar manufacturer in Melbourne, Fla.

“Green products have a smaller impact on the earth – and they’re essential for a healthy future,” Ryan says.

8. Clean with green products

Cleaning up after your dog is no easy task, and staying environmentally friendly while doing it can be a challenge. Choose from a variety of orange-, enzyme- or peroxide-based cleaners that are safe to use around your dog. Look for brands that bear the Environmental Protection Agency’s Design for the Environment Seal (EPA DfE). They’re screened for potential human health and environmental effects, and contain only those ingredients that pose the least concern among chemicals in their class.

May takes her cleaning routine to the extreme. Rather than reach for chemical-based cleaners, she uses tried-and-true favorites from her kitchen cupboard: vinegar and lemon juice.

“I clean a lot with vinegar and water, specifically on any food dish. It also gets rid of any scale that builds up on dishes,” May says. “Plain lemon juice cuts through grease really well.”

For her carpets, May uses a steam cleaner with a chemical-free cleanser, which she uses twice a year. On her linoleum floors, she uses old washcloths dipped in a 1-to-4 ratio vinegar-water solution.

9. Go natural with your yard care

If your dog spends any time outside – and it likely does – it could be ingesting harmful chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides. To keep your dog safe and keep the environment healthy, consider using natural fertilizers and pest control in your garden.

May uses beneficial insects, such as ladybugs, to control the aphid and whitefly population in her garden. She sprays her plants with a natural soap-based pesticide rather than a chemical-based one, and uses all-natural fertilizers in her garden.

“Safe lawn care is really important,” May says. “I use fish emulsion on my lawn and corn gluten to prevent weeds, and so I don’t feel bad if my dogs want to eat a little grass.”

Green living ahead

Going green with your dog takes a little creativity, but it can be done. You can reduce your dog’s carbon pawprint by recycling everyday household goods and using them for your dog. You can purchase organic and sustainable products, and support companies that do their part to reduce carbon emissions. Doing so will benefit you, your pets and our planet.

“Overall, it’s going to make your pet happier and healthier,” May says. “A bonus is all that stuff is great for the environment. Those two things – living beings and the environment – are what it’s all about.”

Wendy Bedwell-Wilson, an Oregon-based writer and author, has been covering pet topics for more than seven years. Her menagerie includes a rescued Pointer-cross and two domestic shorthairs.

What Earth-friendly dog-owner habits do you have? Share your ideas on our forums!

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