Choosing the right plants for a pet-friendly garden

Poisonous plants
Many plants commonly found in today’s gardens are poisonous to animals. These include clematis, ivy, laburnum and wisteria, honeysuckle, rhododendron, azalea, cherry laurel, daphne, dogwood, box tree, privet, yew, thuja (arbor vitae), juniper, candelilla, lilies, larkspur, aconite and spring bloomers like crocus, spring snowflake, narcissus, primrose, tulip, poinsettia and lily-of-the-valley. The full list of poisonous plants can be obtained from your vet or from various poison service points and hotlines. Some plants are poisonous to dogs specifically; others are dangerous for cats. Likewise, the toxicity level of these plants or of the poisonous parts of them also varies.

If the garden is also used by a pet, you should dispense altogether with poisonous plants. You cannot rely here on your pet’s natural instinct to recognise of its own accord which plants are unfit for consumption. The choice of plants in a garden is too narrow, so there will always be the risk that your pet may nibble on something poisonous simply because no alternative presents itself.

Dogs can be trained not to bite plants, and provided enough cat grass is available, cats will seldom chew anything else. However, this does not eliminate the danger. Special care needs to be taken when dealing with young pets, who will happily nibble at anything that happens to be within biting distance. In the case of some plants – including some classified as only mildly poisonous – mere touching will be enough to cause irritations or allergic reactions on sensitive areas of the animal’s skin. You should therefore make it a basic principle never to leave young dogs and cats unattended in the garden.

FOUR PAWS advises you to draw up an inventory of the poisonous plants in your garden and to show this to your vet in the event of any unexplained symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea or skin irritation.

Plants and bushes with thorns
Thorns can be dangerous for pets too: if a dog is chasing a ball, playing with another dog or chasing the neighbour’s cat, it may wind up in the bushes in the heat of the moment and injure itself, especially its...
eyes. This can also happen to a cat – when it’s busy chasing a local rival out of your garden, for example. Some plant thorns include substances capable of causing swelling or skin irritation. Ideally, you should eliminate all thorny plants.

**Pollen-bearing plants**

Many nature-loving pet-owning amateur gardeners have plants in their garden with nectar that is fed on by (wild) bees and other insects. Such insects can pose a danger to pets. If dogs or cats try to snap them up, they may get stung in the mouth or throat. As the sting swells up, this may lead to choking and even suffocation. You should therefore avoid growing this type of plant at the front of a flower bed.

**Plants with scents that repel pets**

Some plants have scents that are disagreeable to sensitive canine or feline noses. This aversion can, however, vary from one animal to the next. For example, many dogs dislike southernwood while some cats will refuse to go near common rue, wormwood or Balkan cranesbill. These individual aversions on the part of your pet can be used to protect it from poisonous plants or to keep it away from flower beds and vegetable beds.

**Cats love catnip**

Cats adore valerian and catnip. In fact, they find the latter so beguiling that lying down and rolling around in it is their idea of heaven. Amateur gardeners are fond of catnip too because it is undemanding and quick to bloom. Bear in mind, however, that cats love this plant as much as you do and cannot be kept away from it. Indulge your cat – but make sure you don’t plant your catnip near any poisonous or thorny plants.

*Above:* Certain plants present a very serious danger to cats and dogs, proving toxic should they be consumed.

*Centre:* Pets should be kept at a safe distance from plants that attract bees.

*Below:* Cats go crazy for catnip.