

How to Make Your Garden Safe for Your Pets

Our pets are a lot closer to the ground than we are. They sniff everything, lay around on the grass, roll in the dirt and then groom by licking themselves. It's easy to overlook the fact that while they are enjoying the warm weather while around the yard and garden, they may be exposed to chemicals we use to keep it looking nice.



Fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides can be harmful to pets if they come into contact with them. Careful storage, as well as following instructions on the package for the appropriate dilutions and waiting period after application, is important.

By Bonney Brown

You may also want to consider the long-term effects of exposure to these chemicals on our pets. Studies show that animals exposed to some of these products are at an increased risk of cancer. Other studies have shown that we track these chemicals indoors on our shoes, affecting even indoor pets.

Nontoxic or less toxic pest control can be an effective alternative, such as diatomaceous earth (food or garden grade – not the type treated for pools), Safer Insecticidal Soap, Sluggo Plus, and BT (Bacillus Thuringiensis) are effective and generally safer.

There are many effective homemade weed killer recipes you can find online. The simplest are spraying weeds with lemon juice or vinegar or a mixture of the two. A gallon of vinegar, a cup of salt or 20 Mule Team Borax, and a tablespoon of dish soap is very effective for killing weeds and keeping them at bay when applied on a warm sunny day. Like most weed killers, these will kill any plant they get on, so take care as you would with any commercial product.

Some professional landscapers use newspaper to deter weeds – just lay it down, cover it with mulch. Letting grass grow a bit longer, 3 inches or so, prevents many weeds from taking hold. And you can prevent flowering weeds from spreading by mowing them before they can go to seed.

A less common approach, but one you might consider, is living with a few weeds in the lawn. After all, one person's weed is another's lovely flower.

Detering animals from your garden

If rabbits or other small animals are eating your plants, try raised beds, exclusion fencing or planting a perimeter of plants that the animals do not like. These plants include garlic, onions, chives, lavender and marigolds. You can lure animals away by planting things they really like in another area of the yard, such as clover, alfalfa, long grass or wildflowers.

There are other deterrents you can purchase or make:

- Fake snakes or owls, inexpensive wind socks or chimes will drive off many animals.
- Motion-activated water repellents deter animals with a sudden burst of water.

- Scent deterrents, usually sprays or crystals that can be applied to surfaces or sprinkled on the ground. Homemade alternatives work for some animals, such as coffee grounds, vinegar, hot pepper, scented soap.
- Ultrasonic sound devices – Humans cannot hear them, but animals do and go the other way. Be sure to buy a model with settings that work for your target animals.
- Cats or dogs digging in your garden? Chicken wire laid on the ground will put a stop to that.
- A mesh, hardware cloth tunnel that you make or a covered loop-wire tunnel (available online) works to protect low plants.
- Ears of corn can be protected from animals with a spray of water mixed with hot sauce or cayenne pepper – spray regularly as ears grow.

Give some of these suggestions a try and you'll feel good knowing you took a savvy, safe and humane approach to solving the challenge of animals in the garden.

Bonney Brown is Co-Founder and President of Humane Network. She created and sustained a 94% communitywide save rate as Executive Director for Nevada Humane Society, which had more than 10,000 annual animal admissions. And she was National No More Homeless Pets Director, COO and Communications Director for Best Friends Animal Society.