

Environmentally Correct Conduct

A Homeowner's Guide To

Gardening for Argus

By Jessica Bacal, Esq.



Last month's column focused on pet waste and the toxins often used to combat fleas and ticks. This month's column emphasizes the importance of an eco-friendly environment that protects the health of household pets; I dedicate it to a salt-and-pepper giant schnauzer named Argus. All too often when we let our pets loose in the backyard, we're more concerned with the damage they might do to costly landscaping than with whether our beloved pet is wandering into a chemical wasteland.

The two major environmental problems adversely affecting pets are the use of pesticides and herbicides, and plantings that may be poisonous to animals.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals maintains a Web site (www.aspa.org) that notes that such common plants such as tulips, daffodils, and lilies are toxic to pets that might munch on flowers. Also, dogs have notoriously poor depth perception and tend not to see planted flower beds. A thick, dense row of plantings makes it easier for dogs to distinguish and therefore to avoid plunging into and damaging hedges.

Many garden borders and fencing materials are made of chemically treated wood, which can leach into the soil where dogs sniff and dig. Herbicides and pesticides that are applied to lawns often adhere to the delicate pads of pets' paws and are tracked indoors, where the chemicals dry and become household dust that is inhaled by pets and humans alike.

When gardening in the portion of the yard where the pet is allowed to roam, consider your pet and his needs. Veterinarians often recommend that homeowners avoid using stones or pebbles in their landscaping plans

because some pets like to gnaw on small rocks. Aside from causing dental problems, stones may be swallowed by the animal, causing digestive distress; if an obstruction results, the effects can be fatal.

Another way homeowners can protect the health of their pets is by using organic wood chips as mulch rather than the standard chemically treated versions. When building a fence or creating a garden border, homeowners should use cedar rather than chemically treated wood. A spray concocted from peppermint soap or cayenne pepper can be as effective as chemical pesticides; it's the rare dog that would eat soapy plants.

Some environmentalists recommend that the yard be minimally landscaped and left in its natural state, with wildflowers rather than lawn. I disagree, because ticks are much more likely to be harbored in tall grass rather than lawns, and in Northern Westchester, ticks constitute a serious threat to all forms of life, human and canine alike. Unless pets are confined indoors (as are some cats), they should be carefully checked daily for ticks, which must be removed immediately upon detection. Removal from thick fur can be tricky: don't attempt to dislodge embedded ticks with a lit match, as you might set your pet on fire. (I learned this lesson the hard way: my daughter has yet to forgive me, although her dog's fur eventually grew back.)

Several years ago my beloved giant schnauzer, Argus, died after developing multiple tumors. The veterinarian theorized that the illness was linked to chemical exposure. My property was never treated with either pesticides or fertilizer, so I was shocked by the diagnosis. But on further thought, I developed a hypothesis. Argus had a sophisticated inner

clock that enabled him to trot down the street every afternoon at 3:15 to meet my son's school bus. On the way home, Argus and my son liked to visit the neighbors. Argus enjoyed spending time with the honorary grandmother of our street, who kept choice leftovers for his consumption, but he especially enjoyed visiting homes with small children. He would sit very still so they could touch every inch of his shaggy body, using him as a living jungle gym and surrogate pony, and he never moved except to wag his stubby tail. What I did not identify as a hazard was that several of the neighbors, particularly those with children, were understandably concerned about tick infestation, and many applied pesticides, rather than use alternate methods of tick control, to their property. It had never occurred to me before that Argus's life may have been put at risk and ultimately ended because of those neighborhood visits.

Today, most communities have leash laws, and dogs no longer roam unrestricted. Perhaps it is just as well. And perhaps if homeowners think of Argus when planning their gardens, special care to avoid pet toxins will be considered.

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