

Norwich Terriers, 8-18

Title: Landscaping for your dogs

Our dogs have an intimate relationship with the landscape -- they walk through it, lie on it, dig in it, and perhaps eat it. We want the landscape to be safe for dogs and people alike; a beautiful yard and happy, healthy dogs can co-exist, but it does take some planning, patience, and realistic expectations.

Let's start with the grass. An expanse of green carpet has become the ideal, and in some neighborhoods, anything less is looked down upon. But, in fact, a perfectly manicured lawn is the most unnatural environment you can strive for and requires consistent inputs -- your valuable time, nutrients, and water. Ask yourself if a mixed species lawn will do ... the naturally occurring combination of grasses, broadleaf plants, and clover is still green and can be mowed to provide an appropriate surface for you and your dogs.

If you want to pursue the traditional lawn, you must start with the soil. First, identify what type of soil you have (clay, silt, loam) and what nutrients it contains and lacks. This can be accomplished with the help of your local agricultural extension; many offer free soil testing services. To provide nutrients, I choose to use fertilizers that are as natural as possible. They will have ingredients that you will recognize, like kelp, fish emulsion, bone meal, feather meal, and alfalfa. Natural fertilizers will have low numbers on the bag, the X-X-X you see on the label. Depending on what your soil test has revealed, you may need to do a close reading to see if the fertilizer is providing the micronutrients your soil requires. All soils can benefit from the application of compost and most need mechanical aeration to break up compaction at least yearly. The creation and nurturing of a healthy soil takes time (years!); patience is required.

Remove weeds by hand whenever possible. If you have a large expanse of weeds and you would like to re-establish the area with turf or a garden, the chemical-free way to kill the offending plants is with heat. Cover the area with clear plastic and weigh it down. Depending on the time of year and temperature, the heat will kill everything below the plastic--look up "soil solarization" for more information.

Choose a grass species that is appropriate for your climate (southern vs. northern) and amount of light your yard gets. This is best done with the help of a local nursery professional. Water appropriately and accept that in some arid areas of the United States, a turf lawn is not appropriate due to water restrictions. On average, plants need 1" of water per week to survive and thrive during the growing season.

Do not cut your lawn too short. Most lawns should be kept at 2-3". Turf roots grow in proportion to the height of the lawn, so letting your grass get a little taller can encourage root development. A slightly taller lawn also provides more shade, which can keep the soil cool and helps retain moisture. If the burned areas caused by dog urine bother you, do your best to dilute the urine with water, or restrict dog pottying to an out-of-sight area.

The other elements of your landscape -- trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals -- should be chosen with the goal of providing a pleasing and safe environment for you and your dogs, and one that encourages biodiversity in the wider world. Familiarize yourself with the existing plants in your yard; if you are unsure, take photos or plant parts into a local nursery. When choosing new plants, read the tags and labels carefully and ask questions. Toxicity may arise from different parts of the plant: flowers, fruit, seeds, nuts, sap, roots, bark, stems, or leaves. There are online databases of plants toxic to dogs; check them before you add a plant you are unfamiliar with. When you purchase a new plant for your garden, keep the tag for your records.

When planting your landscape, strive for variety and remember to use the “right plant, right place” philosophy. For the best chance at success, choose plants that are adapted for your USDA hardiness zone, light condition, and soil type. Remember that newly installed plants will need extra T.L.C.-this effort in the first year or two will pay off during the life of the plant in terms of size, vitality, and resistance to pests and disease. Use a mix of plants from different botanical families and of different heights and growth habits to encourage a healthy mix of fungi, bacteria, insects, birds, and other animal life. Just as with the turf, a healthy soil is required; use compost, natural fertilizers, and mulches in your beds.

Some areas of the country may require strategies to keep wildlife out; in areas where Lyme disease is endemic, you may want to plant with that in mind. Use plants that are more deer-resistant, avoid planting Japanese barberry (ticks love!), push forested areas and wood piles back from the home, prune trees to increase sunlight, and increase the amount of hardscape close to your home.

If you have terriers like I do, or other dogs who love to dig, consider providing them a place where digging is allowed. Build your dog a sandbox! Plans and ideas for these sandboxes are all over the internet. Build it away from your gardens, bury some of your dog’s favorite toys in the sand, keep the sand moist, and cover it when not in use to keep cats and other wildlife away.

With patience, planning, and an understanding of your site, you can establish a landscape that you and your dogs can enjoy safely and for years to come. See you outside!

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