

Common Spring Hazards: How to Protect Your Pet

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The damp, cool, cloudy days of winter are over, and the warm, sunny days of spring are here. Spring cleaning is beginning. Garden and yard maintenance is happening. Vehicles are getting their spring make-overs, and people and their pets are spending much more time outdoors. Unfortunately, spring can also bring with it many dangers for pets. The good news is that as pet owners, there are steps we can take to protect our pets from these common hazards.

Common spring dangers include: lawn and garden fertilizers, mulches/weed killers, slug and snail baits, rodenticides (mouse and rat poisons) and insecticides, cleaning products, toxic house and garden plants, and antifreeze/coolants from vehicles. Fortunately, there are pet-safe alternatives to many of these potential dangers.

Lawn & Garden Fertilizers:

Fertilizers are commonly used to help grass, flowers, and other plants grow quickly and look their best. Unfortunately, the chemicals in most commercial fertilizers can be toxic to dogs and cats if ingested, and can cause skin abnormalities if contacted. Instead of buying toxic, commercial fertilizers this spring consider making your own. A mixture of carbon rich browns such as dried leaves, wood chips, and straw, & nitrogen rich greens such as grass clippings, will help you achieve the best results. Alternatively, ask your local nursery staff for pet-safe alternatives or go to www.petsafefertilizers.com

Mulches/Weed Killers:

Weed killers such as 2,4-D can cause cancer in both pets and people, but they are still commonly used. Some people prefer to use mulches to prevent weeds from growing, rather than killing them once they are present. Although some mulches are pet-safe, others are not, especially cocoa mulches. Cocoa mulch is made from ground up cocoa bean shells and contains theobromine, the ingredient in chocolate that is highly toxic to pets. If you are having trouble keeping weeds under control you can use ingredients from your kitchen as weed preventatives. Spreading corn gluten meal over an area can help control the emergence of several types of weeds such as clover, dandelion, and fox tail.

Slug and Snail Bait:

Slugs and snails can be a gardener's nightmare; they love to eat leaves, causing devastation to beautifully planted gardens. Commercial slug and snail baits are highly toxic to cats and dogs but there are safe alternatives. You can place a physical barrier of sawdust or crushed eggshells around your plants, or you can place pungent herbs like mint or rosemary near them to repel unwanted guests. Other alternatives include purchasing pet-friendly snail and slug bait. Safer's pet-friendly slug and snail bait can be purchased at Canadian's Tire and other home improvement stores.

Rodenticides (Rat and Mouse Poison) and Insecticides:

Spring often brings unwanted rodents and pests into gardens and basements. Unfortunately, there are very few non-toxic rodenticides, so it is safest to resort to traps for these little pests (or better yet, let your cat keep rodents at bay). Even poisons that are in pet-safe containers will not protect your pet if your pet eats a mouse or rat that has already been poisoned. Similarly, insecticides are usually toxic to pets. Instead of using chemicals, go organic and try planting flowers like Mexican marigold, which naturally repel insects without harming animals. Contact your veterinarian, pest-control centre, or organic farmer for a list of pet-safe ideas for insect control.

Toxic House and Garden Plants:

Many of the plants that we often use to make our homes and gardens colourful and beautiful can be poisonous to our furry friends. Toxic plants include: bird of paradise, buttercup, cherry leaves, clematis, crocus, fern, foxglove, iris, ivy, lily, lucky bamboo, morning glory, mushrooms, poppies, potato plants, primrose, rhododendron, rhubarb, sweet pea, tulip, and many more. Instead of planting these toxic plants, consider planting pet-safe plant instead, like: African violet, basil, begonias, calendula, dill, forget-me-not, jasmine, lavender, mint, pansy, rose, rosemary, sage, snapdragon, strawberry, sun flower, Venus fly trap, zucchini squash.

Cleaning Products:

As you're gearing up for this year's "spring cleaning," remember that many of the chemicals we use to clean our homes are not only toxic to our pets, but can be toxic to us if we inhale, consume, or contact them. Keep all cleaning products far out of your pet's reach and consider trying some of these pet-safe alternatives:

Baking soda – deodorizes, scours, and softens water

Borax – cleans, deodorizes, disinfects, and softens water from

Cornstarch – can be used to clean windows and carpets, and polish furniture

Lemon – is very acidic and is an effective anti-bacterial

White Vinegar – cuts grease, combats mildew and offensive odours, and removes some stains and waxes.

Vehicle Coolant/Anti-Freeze:

Anti-freeze poisoning can happen at any time of year, but it commonly happens in the spring when neighbourhood folks are working on their vehicles or are taking them to their mechanics for fluid changes. These activities sometimes lead to anti-freeze leaking from vehicles onto the ground. Anti-freeze has a very sweet taste and pets will readily ingest it when they come across it. Unfortunately, the main ingredient in anti-freeze, ethylene glycol, is highly toxic to both cats and dogs and can lead to death if not treated quickly. Different brands of pet-safe anti-freeze are available. These products contain propylene glycol instead of the highly toxic ethylene glycol. Check your local automotive store for pet-safe anti-freeze alternatives. Even if you don't have pets, you could be saving your neighbour's pets, or wildlife from ethylene glycol poisoning.

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