

Safe Salads for Your Pets

By Susan Camp

In less than two weeks, spring will arrive, and, hopefully, we will see the last of the cold, dreary days. The grays and browns (and the white of our too frequent snow days this season) will begin to give way to the delicate baby greens of new grass and unfurling leaves.

We will be anxious to get outside and enjoy the sunshine and fresh air. Our pets, too, will welcome the opportunity to romp and play in the yard. Fellow Master Gardener and friend, Dru Adkins, gave me the following message for pet owners and parents of small children:

“Here is a tip for owners of cats, dogs or other pets, and for parents of small children: Be careful about allowing them to go outside for a “salad”. Pets may eat grass or other outdoor plants, and young children occasionally want to copy their furry friends. Your veterinarian will agree that animals may crave grass for various reasons, sometimes just to throw up. A better solution than taking a chance on your pet ingesting a poisonous plant or toxic substance is to grow organic grass for your pet indoors. The grass grows quickly and is very easy to tend. Growing grass for your pets will ensure that the grass has not been treated with toxic chemicals or oils. Your pets can safely enjoy their summer salads.”

Dru has reminded us that we are responsible for the safety of our pets when we let them go outside. Dogs and cats are curious creatures. Like young children, they often explore the environment by tasting vegetation and other substances that may be harmful.

A brief review of the literature on the internet indicates that veterinarians and other animal experts are divided on why they believe cats and dogs eat grass and other green plants. Many theories have been proposed over the years, but there is no single correct answer. Grass-eating simply may be normal canine and feline behavior.

According to WebMD, grass eating by dogs is a form of pica, or consumption of substances that are not considered food. If your dog likes to munch on juicy, green grass, he may have a nutritional deficiency, or he may be bored and need some other form of stimulation, such as vigorous playtime with you. A list of common plants and trees toxic to dogs is posted on the petMD website. Among the most toxic plants are English ivy (*Hedera helix*), castor bean (*Ricinus communis*), mistletoe (*Viscum album*), and jimsonweed (*Datura stramonium*). Other plants that are harmful to dogs include amaryllis (*Amaryllis spp.*), chrysanthemum (*Compositae spp.*), foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*), and tulip and narcissus bulbs (*Tulipa/Narcissus spp.*). Azalea and rhododendron (*Rhododendron spp.*), boxwood, (*Buxus sempervirens*), and wisteria (*Wisteria spp.*) also are toxic.

Cats may enjoy grazing on grass and green plants, as well. While there is some speculation that cats ingest green plants for chlorophyll or other nutrients, there appears to be no definitive proof

of this. Some cats may eat grass to induce vomiting or help clear the digestive tract of a hairball. According to the ASPCA website, frequent chewers or suckers of non-nutritive substances may suffer from a compulsive disorder. Cats with a compulsive chewing disorder may need professional help from a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB). Plants and trees included in the previous paragraph are also toxic to cats.

An extensive list of plants poisonous to pets is available on the website of The Humane Society of the United States. The list includes garden flowers, trees, shrubs, vines, and wildflowers. Similar lists are posted on other sites. In addition, the ASPCA maintains an Animal Poison Control Center Hotline: 1-800-426-4435.

Poisonous plants, however, are only part of the issue. Life-threatening incidents can occur when your dog or cat ingests grass or a plant that has been treated with a pesticide, herbicide, or fertilizer. Most commercial products are toxic to animals and humans. Read product labels carefully and use only as directed. If your pets go outside, consider whether you are putting them at risk by using a toxic product in your yard or garden. Gloucester Master Gardeners are available in the Main Library each Tuesday from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM to answer questions or research a product of concern. Master Gardeners are available by phone at the Gloucester Extension Office from 2 PM to 4 PM each Thursday. The number is (804) 693-2602.

Always keep toxic products in their original containers, capped and out of reach of pets and children. House plants also should be out of reach or relegated to an area of the house where pets can be supervised. Cats are safer in the house and adapt very well to an indoor lifestyle, but we live in a rural county, and many cats, as well as their canine friends, are farm or working animals.

Dru suggests planting an indoor grass garden for your pet. Attractive containers of various grass seeds or catnip are available at pet supply houses. Directions for planting your own pet salad bar are available on the Humane Society website. Fluffy and Rover will thank you for providing them with a safe, tasty treat!

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