

# Healing gardens

by Denise Flaim

For many people, herbs have a mystical connotation. They are magical elixirs, mysterious healing agents, the stuff of Shakespearean witches and marathon episodes of *Charmed*. But never mind those 'hoodoo' clichés. While herbs are natural, they are not by definition benign. Any agent that has the ability to heal can also harm, and it is crucial to consult a qualified veterinarian before administering any herb. That said, finding a veterinarian who is well versed in herbs is easier said than done. Holistic veterinarians are sort of like breed entries: they can vary tremendously in their quality.

## Popular picks

Below is a starter list of some commonly available herbs that are useful for dogs. Again, remember to consult with a vet or herbalist before administering any herb: Just as you would frown on any wannabe who throws two dogs together with no breed knowledge, so too should you respect the fact that millennia of herb lore cannot be synthesized in one magazine article.

## Slippery Elm

Possibly the best kept secret for soothing upset tummies, the cartoonish sounding slippery elm is a native North American tree. Its inner bark contains mucilage, which coats and soothes the gastrointestinal tract.

Most commonly available in pill and tincture form slippery elm is a safe herb if your dog is experiencing diarrhea or an upset stomach. A gentle but effective digestive aid, it may also help relieve inflammatory bowel conditions.

The bad news: increasing demand, overharvesting, and the species' own susceptibility to Dutch elm disease have put the slippery-elm tree into a precarious ecological position.

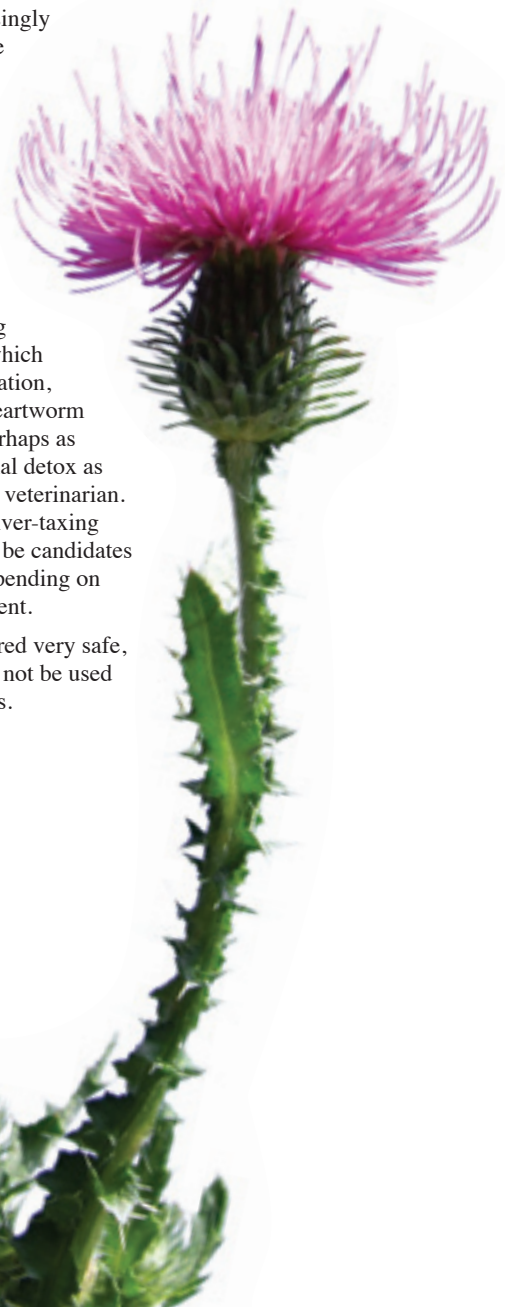
## Milk Thistle

Your dog's liver is his recycling centre, the place where toxins are sorted from the bloodstream and then sent on their way to be eliminated from the body. When the liver is weakened, the body feels its effects, much as if our municipal sanitation workers decided to take a week or two off.

The liver's filtering function can become overtaxed when a dog is on medication or needs to undergo anesthesia for a surgical procedure. Enter milk thistle, a natural liver tonic that hails from the sunflower family. Milk thistle seeds contain silymarin, which protects the liver from toxins that are present and helps in the regeneration of liver cells.

Despite the increasingly toxic world we live in, most holistic vets do not recommend that healthy dogs be given milk thistle daily. Instead, it should be given as needed, during or following toxin exposure – which can include vaccination, deworming, and heartworm medication – or perhaps as part of an occasional detox as prescribed by your veterinarian. Dogs who are on liver-taxing medications might be candidates for regular use, depending on your vet's assessment.

Otherwise considered very safe, milk thistle should not be used on pregnant bitches.



## Dandelion

Think twice before you start pulling those yellow dots from your lawn. Reviled as a weed by landscapers, dandelion is revered as a powerful healer by herbalists. This is another natural detoxifier that not only boosts the liver, but helps digestion as well.

All parts of the dandelion are edible, but most herbal preparations contain the roots and leaves.

Many experts recommend giving dandelion as a daily supplement. Be aware that the herb's diuretic effects – which make it so popular with body builders who want to drop water weight fast – may lead to housebreaking lapses in old or ill dogs.

As for those dandelions on your lawn, they are fair game. You can add the chopped leaves to your dogs meals – provided you have kept your lawn and gardens pesticide free.

## Calendula

This powerpack of healing flower is formally known as *Calendula officinalis*. Informally, it's called the pot marigold, which isn't the same as the pungent French moptops you grow in your yard. But you need not worry about gathering your own: *Calendula* ointment is readily available at most well stocked health food stores.

*Calendula* is an unparalleled wound healer, perfect for minor cuts, abrasions, burns, and insect bites. Make sure the wound is well cleaned and free of any pus before applying, as *calendula* closes wounds very quickly, and you don't want any toxins to be trapped inside.



## Lavender

Let's move beyond this herb's pivotal role in underwear drawer sachets because lavender's smell is not only pleasing: It's therapeutic. Recent veterinary research shows that when lavender oil is diffused into the air – the technical term is aromatherapy – it can make a significant difference in calming canine behaviour.

A 2005 study on shelter dogs demonstrated that exposure to lavender scent reduced barking and physical activity. Another, published a year later, suggested that lavender could reduce excitable behaviours during travelling, such as vocalisation and restlessness. Extrapolating lavender's calming effect to other stress induced conditions, such as separation anxiety, isn't too big of a leap.

When applied topically, lavender is also an excellent antimicrobial and wound healer, helping to reduce scarring and speed tissue repair.

Before you use lavender in the air or on your dog's skin, the herb must be distilled into an essential oil. In this process, a plant is exposed to steam, releasing its powerful, aromatic oils, which have been valued since antiquity. Though lavender is one of the mildest essential oils, most experts recommend you dilute it in a carrier oil such as almond oil. And be especially careful around puppies or cats, whose nervous systems may be too sensitive for even passing exposure to oils.

With essential oils, purity is everything. And, to confuse matters, the word pure on the label is basically meaningless. Only buy oils that are therapeutic grade; most any oil you buy in a health food store won't fulfil this criterion.

## Bloodroot

As its name suggests, it's the orange coloured rhizome and reddish sap of this perennial flowering plant that interest herbalists.

Bloodroot has traditionally been used in a black salve to treat skin cancers and infections, as well as less dire problems such as skin tags. When applied to the skin, black salve is escharotic – that is, corrosive, burning away the rogue cells. Because it is so caustic, black salve must be used under veterinary supervision.

An increasingly popular, if unconventional, treatment for canine cancer is Neoplasene. It can be used topically for skin cancers such as mast cells or injected into tumours.

Although these herbs rank among the most popular, they are just a few of the garden grown medicines that can help keep your dog's health in full bloom.

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