

Culinary Herbs for your Pet

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Gourmet cooking for your pet? Has the world gone mad?

No, in fact the reverse is true. The world makes much more sense to people who see the improvement in their pet's health using fresh veges, fruit and herbs.

I find that many pet owners then improve their own diet, and thereby realize how enjoyable and beneficial such a simple and practical relationship with nature can be. They come to appreciate that veges, fruit and herbs contain essential nutrients that can be hard to identify and duplicate with supplements and medications. Somehow, the body digests and utilizes the nutrients in real food more easily than in processed tinned or dried pet food or in pharmaceutical preparations.

Some of these nutrients we are becoming much more aware of. For example the antioxidant lycopene which is essential for elderly male humans and dogs with prostate enlargement, is found plentifully in watermelon and cooked tomatoes (and red wine for the humans!). Another prime treatment for the same condition is Saw Palmetto, found in ground pumpkin seeds. Add to these the betacarotene from pumpkin, sweet potato or carrot, and we can expect a much healthier prostate gland!

Similarly, the common culinary herbs that most of us have in the kitchen or garden can help significantly with many common pet ailments. Many cat owners are aware of the common tendency for older cats to suffer from kidney degeneration. There are some conventional veterinary treatments that can be beneficial, but I see the best results in cats with kidney disease who are given as natural a diet as possible - ideally raw chicken, fish or rabbit, cheese, egg, veges, limited or no dried cat food, and herbs, as well as any conventional treatments which have been found to be helpful. Useful and available herbs for kidney disease are parsley and couch grass. Make sure you have not sprayed chemicals or wetting agents on the grass before picking. If your cat likes them, cut these herbs up well and pulverize or blend, and soak in a little boiling water to extract the active ingredients. A tiny pinch/ a few drops in the main meal of the day long term can help keep up appetite, weight and energy. There are some other herbs that can help which can be obtained from a qualified herbalist or holistic vet.

Some cats with kidney disease can be helped by feeding lamb or chicken kidneys 2 or 3 times a week, because this can be helpful to their own kidney function by providing enzymes and nutrients.

Many older dogs suffer from arthritis. There are many therapies available to ease the pain and stiffness, some of which help some individuals more than others, such as conventional anti-inflammatory drugs, acupuncture, chiropractic, Bowen, massage, and homoeopathy. Often very useful is a diet change, away from processed tinned and dried dog food, to increasing raw meaty bones, veges, fruit, low fat yoghurt or cheese, and kelp and fish. Added to this, glucosamine, chondroitin, green lipped muscle and other 'building blocks' of joint tissue can be very beneficial. Dog and cat - specific brands of these chondroprotective nutrients are available over the counter from vet clinics.

Herbs to add at home to the main meal of arthritis sufferers, are a small pinch of turmeric, which is now the main constituent of several well researched anti-inflammatory tablets for humans, and ginger, either fresh or dried, especially if the dog seems more stiff and painful in colder weather. As well as turmeric and ginger, many of the other eastern curry herbs are also therapeutic Ayurvedic herbs and can have beneficial effects on pain and inflammation, such as cummin, cayenne and coriander. Try making a bit of extra Thai curry for the dog! Other anti-inflammatory herbs you may have growing in your garden are dandelion leaf and nettle leaf. Pour a little boiling water onto the macerated leaves and soak for a few hours, before adding a few drops to the dog's food, or just stir fry and add to food. The nettle does not sting after heating, and is a popular Chinese stir fry vegetable. Dandelion leaves can be added to salads for humans or dogs!

Generally, dogs will refuse herbs that are not beneficial to them, but even if they like them, do not exceed the amounts proportional to body weight that humans would have in their food, and provide plenty of variety and change. Also remember that too much onion and garlic, especially if raw, can cause anaemia in some animals if given too much.

Plenty of different veges in the diet of overweight, arthritic animals can help them lose weight, which can give great results in the treatment of pain and stiffness. In summer, and especially if your dog doesn't feel the cold much, fruit

can be a good addition to the diet too, but only if she likes it. In Chinese medicine, fruit and salad are 'cooling' foods, so don't overdo them with animals that are worse in cold weather, or feel the cold easily. Cooked veges are good warming foods for pets who feel the cold.

Never try and force your pet to eat things they hate – they normally have some sense of what is beneficial to them. Many young animals suffer badly from travel sickness in the car. This is often easily fixed by adding a small pinch of ginger to a small meal prior to traveling. If you have it, add a small pinch of soaked peppermint leaves too, or some peppermint tea. Better still, if you have peppermint essential oil, put one drop onto the pet's collar or onto the car air freshener dangle. Don't overdo it, or you will hate the smell of peppermint for a long time to come!

Moving to the other end of the animal, mild diarrhea problems can be treated with a pinch of psyllium husks and/or slippery elm bark with each meal. To begin with, a 24 hour fast, with plenty of plain water available, is the best treatment for otherwise healthy, adult animals. For most animals with this ailment, the best food to then give is well boiled white rice, cooked chicken meat (no skin or bone), and mashed pumpkin or sweet potato, then add in the moistened, powdered herbs.

It is always a good idea to consult your holistic vet or qualified herbalist when using any new herb or diet for more than about a month. Happy healing!

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