

Beyond 'Poop 'n' Scoop'

How dog parks are reducing the impact of pet waste.



WHEN Robert and Brenda Vale published *Time to Eat the Dog? The Real Guide to Sustainable Living* in 2009, dog blogs lit up in fury. The authors had crunched the numbers and reported that a medium-sized dog has twice the climate impact of driving a gas-guzzling car 16,000 kilometres – mainly due to a dog's carnivorous diet. They focused on what goes into Fido, but let's consider what comes out. According to the US Department of Agriculture, the average dog produces 124 kilograms of waste per year. Canada is home to about six million dogs. That translates into more than 700,000 tonnes of waste each year. Just a week's worth of that waste is enough to fill a regulation CFL field 4.5 metres deep.

Of course, country dogs with room to roam distribute their waste like wild animal scat. But urban dog poo is concentrated around spaces shared by humans: yards, sidewalks, parks and waterways. Around 60 percent of it is picked up and thrown in the garbage to end up in sealed landfills where it slowly decomposes and emits methane gas – a more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Anything left on the ground is unsanitary and can end up polluting watersheds.

How can we do better? Two dog parks offer ideas.

Volunteers who maintained the dog run in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Park in Montreal successfully composted pet waste from 2005 to 2010. They installed one-metre-cubed plastic bins and encouraged owners to put their dogs' doo in the bins and cover it with donated sawdust. The volunteers then turned the compost when visiting with their pets. Full bins were covered until the compost was finished. Then it was bagged and left as free garden fertilizer. According to Jim Fares, president of the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Dog Run Association at the time, the process was virtually odourless. The compost quickly became popular and, he says, produced "huge flowers." (When volunteers dwindled after five years, the city took over park maintenance and discontinued composting.)

Denali National Park, a wildlife preserve 190 kilometres southwest of Fairbanks,

Handling Cat Scat

Even cats leave a carbon pawprint – roughly equal to that of a small Volkswagen. But cat scat is trickier to recycle than dog waste for two reasons. One is *Toxoplasma gondii*, a parasite often found in cat poo that can affect infants, pregnant women and people with weakened immunity. Another factor is that the clay used in some cat litter can inhibit decay. Better options are carbon-based litter made from recycled paper, grains or wood. These waste litters can be recycled by burial, composting or vermiculture (worm farming!). Properly recycled cat poo can be used to fertilize decorative plants – but as with canine compost, keep it away from edible crops.

Alaska, has been composting sled dog waste for 35 years, keeping the area clean for over 500,000 visitors a year. The odourless finished compost is used in flower beds and gardens where it helps retain soil moisture and reduces the need for fertilizers and pesticides.

An even simpler approach might be to dig open trenches in dog parks and provide some carbon matter like sawdust or shredded leaves. Visitors could simply scoop waste into the trench and cover it with some dirt and sawdust. When full, the trench could be covered with soil and landscaped with native perennials.

Dog poo compost not tested for pathogens should never be used on edible crops. But with just a little more planning, our millions of furry friends could be providing us with some doggone good gardening richness. **EW**

Rose Seemann is the owner and operator of EnviroWagg, a Colorado company dedicated to collecting and composting canine waste into safe, nutrient-rich garden soil. She is author of *The Pet Poo Handbook: How to Recycle and Compost Pet Waste* from New Society Publishers.