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How Does Your Garden Grow?

Max is such a good boy. He's your constant companion, your shadow, your best buddy, an angel among Weimaraners. That's why it's a complete shock when you find that he's dug a hole under the fence that separates your yard from your neighbor's garden. The warm spring weather has brought her garden to life and Max is munching on her plants as though he just found the best salad bar in town.

Your shock at the unMax-like behavior first turns to anger but it's quickly replaced by fear that what he ingested may be toxic. Is he just getting some extra fiber or has he poisoned himself? What should you do?

If you have any doubt about the toxicity of what your dog has eaten, contact your vet immediately. Don't take a "wait and see" approach because prompt action is key in poisoning cases. One of the first questions that you'll be asked by the person manning the phone at the vet's office is, "What kind of plant did your dog eat?" If you're not sure of what the plant is or if there are several possible plants take samples and head for the vet's office. When you take the sample bring one that's complete as possible, include the flowers, seeds, leaves, stems and roots. If your dog has vomited the ingested material bring that too. Having a complete sample makes identification easier and increases accuracy of diagnosis.

What if you recognize the plant, know its common name but are unsure about its toxicity? If you're certain of the name it's easy to do a little research. The Internet abounds with websites listing information and pictures of common toxic plants. There's a list on the AKC website, the ASPCA, various veterinary schools, information resources are readily available. Check it out but contact your veterinarian if there's the slightest doubt about the identification of the plant.

What if you can't get to a vet? There's back up available via animal poison control hotlines. To find one that fits your needs ask for your vet's advice or do an Internet search. Take a few minutes and program a number of one of these services into your phone. Availability and cost vary so do a little up front research to be prepared in case you ever need help.

I spoke to my own veterinarian about poisoning cases and she tells me that most are the result of accidental poisoning. People simply don't know what's toxic and we're surrounded by things in our every day environment that are harmful to our dogs. Dogs seem to have the motto, "When in doubt, put it in your mouth." Poisoning from ingestion of plant material goes up in the spring when there's a new crop of tasty tender shoots and sprigs and when our dogs are spending more time out of doors.

While spring increases the opportunities for outdoor dietary indiscretions there's danger lurking indoors too. Did you recently pick up some new house plants? Were you given a gift of a new potted plant? Play it safe, no telling when your curious dog might consider your new plant to be a take out salad. Invest some time in a census of your indoor flora and make sure it doesn't appear on one of the listings of poisonous plants.

Enjoy the spring weather, spend more time out of doors with your dog but make sure you know how your garden grows and that it's safe for your entire family – human and canine.

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