

We all know that dogs have a better sense of smell than we do and that they often instinctively know when something is wrong. However it has only been in the last few years that scientists have started to examine how animals use these abilities to select what they need, not only for nutrition but also for health. This new science is called Zoopharmacognosy, through this it has been established that almost all species use plants, herbs and minerals for their medicinal value¹.

By domesticating animals we restrict the access that our dogs have to the plants and minerals that they would have in the wild, however we do have the opportunity to offer them these choices through the use of essential oils, herbs and minerals; allowing them to utilise these, not only for physical ailments, but also for emotional problems and to supplement their nutrition.

Having a longstanding interest in canine health and nutrition, learning about this new science and how I could use it to help my own animals led me to study with Caroline Ingraham, the world's leading expert in what is coming to be known as 'animal aromatics'². I became absolutely fascinated by the often remarkable results that could be achieved.

For instance my oldest Lab, Hook, has hip problems and whilst they don't slow him down much they do give him some discomfort. In our first workshop both my dog and a much younger Lab with severe hip dysplasia selected the same herbs and oils, the exception being that the younger dog was in pain and also selected devil's claw – a strong pain killer. Both dogs selected Rosehip seed oil, which was used by the American Indians and has been shown in trials on humans to alleviate the symptoms of osteoarthritis³; spirulina, an algae that is a brilliant natural source of

vitamins and minerals and a natural anti oxidant⁴ – helping the body to boost the immune system and regenerate itself. Finally they selected chalk, which at first puzzled us a little, until a chemist amongst the group pointed out that it is calcium carbonate and that the calcium, combined with the vitamins in spirulina, could be used to help regenerate damaged bone and cartilage.

So how do you know how much is needed? Well that is the beauty of this, the dog will tell you. In the above example Hook took all of the items selected approximately every three days through the winter – depending on the weather and level of exercise he was getting. He was well enough to do half days on a shoot, which he had been unable to do the previous year on Glucosamine. Once the weather started to warm up he showed less interest in all except the spirulina, which he continues

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to take about once a week. How can I tell if he wants what is offered? Well firstly it is very important that they are all offered separately and not with food. In his case he either licks at the substance or touches the packaging with his teeth. Other dogs will react differently, so the skill is really in learning to read each dog's reactions as well as a good knowledge of what to offer from the thousands of oils, herbs and minerals available.

The way that the animal indicates its interest can also show how it would like the herbs or oils used, for instance dogs often want to take things orally, but when my youngest Lab had a cut on her leg she chose 'Dead Sea mud' which is very rich in minerals that help the skin to heal and hence popular in expensive beauty salons throughout the world. She clearly indicated that she wanted it applied to her leg, by nudging the pot with her leg. Once it had been applied, she then decided to

lick the final bit off of my fingers. I have to say that applying mud to a wound felt entirely wrong, when conventional teaching would be to keep the wound as clean as possible, but within days the wound had healed well and there was no scarring.

To date my work with dogs has included: shock after a minor accident, help in coming to terms with a traumatic life and adjusting to a new home, loss of a family member, cuts, skin and joint problems, to name but a few. Reactions vary from animal to animal as well as across the species. Horses for instance can be very clear in their indication and others, such as cats and reptiles, may show little more than a relaxing or softening of the eyes. This is why I always work closely with the owner (who after all, knows the animal best) and in the home environment, as a relaxed animal will give clearer, easier to read indications.

Since the animal selects for itself there is little risk of overdose, so long as the substances are offered in the correct way. Whilst it's important to remember this is no substitute for a check up at the vets, it can be an effective alternative for those problems where veterinary science has so far been ineffective.

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Scientific references:

- 1 Huffman Michael A Aug 2001, Selfmedicative behaviour in African Great Apes. Rodriguez & Wrangham 1993 Zoopharmacognosy: The use of Medicinal Plants by Animals. Engel Cindy 2002 Wild Health.
- 2 Ingraham C Aromatherapy for Animals 2001
- 3 Scond J 2005 Dept of Clinical Biochemistry Copenhagen
- Willch S 2007 Charite University Medical Centre Berlin.
- 4 Besednova L. et al 1979
Qureshi M et al 1995 & 1996



Jan Wilmot is a life long animal lover and founder of The Barkery: a company that aims to provide a more natural alternative to commercial dog treats. From using herbs for their taste Jan quickly progressed to using them, as well as essential oils, for their therapeutic properties. She currently works with badly injured and abused animals at a Spanish donkey sanctuary, as well as family pets; seeking to improve their quality of life using natural remedies