



When educating your customers about natural remedies for pet maladies, make sure they know it's not a quick fix, but rather a long-term solution.

Alternative Remedies for Pets

Herbal supplements, aromatherapy mists and flower essences for pets are not created equal. Here's how they work—and how they differ. By Lisa Plummer

It's no secret that Americans are embracing more natural lifestyles for their pets. U.S. pet owners will shell out more than \$2.5 billion on natural pet products in 2012, and more than \$3 billion by 2014, according to a recent report by Packaged Facts.

As part of this trend, more pet owners are turning toward holistic veterinary medicine and alternative health care products such as natural plant-based remedies. Herbal supplements, aromatherapy mists and flower essences for pets are formulated to address a variety of common health and behavioral issues, such as hip and joint problems, allergies and anxiety.

But before you stock a bunch of natural remedies on your shelves, you need to understand what they are, how

they work, how they differ, and whether they are a good fit for your store. Here's the lowdown on plant-based remedies for pets.

Herbal Supplements

While conventional Western medicine tends to focus on treating or suppressing disease symptoms, holistic medicine focuses on the root causes of health or behavioral disorders. Holistic practitioners consider all aspects of an animal's health, not just its symptoms. They often rely on natural and herbal remedies as go-to treatments for a variety of chronic conditions in pets.

Available in powder, tablet and liquid form, over-the-counter herbal formulas are not only effective for a range of common pet disorders but also are

gentler and safer to use than conventional drugs, according to Dr. Chris Bessent, a veterinarian and founder of Herbsmith Inc. (Hartland, Wis.).

"I look at herbs as somewhere between a food and a drug," said Bessent. "Most retailers understand that if you feed the right kind of high-quality food that you support health and wellness. The same holds true with herbs. They're kind of like a functional food in that they have an effect on the body that supports health and wellness, and just like food they're very safe to use and have minimal side effects. The trade-off is that they take longer to take effect."

Herbsmith uses pure Chinese herbs in its eight herbal blends for dogs and cats. The formulas include Clear AllerQi for seasonal allergies; Calm Shen for stress and anxiety; Comfort Aches for aches and discomfort; Athlete for athletic, high-energy pets; and formulas for bladder care and joint, digestive and immune system support. Most of these herbal blends are available in powder and tablet form.

Peaceable Kingdom Essentials (Hershey, Pa.) offers nine liquid herbal supplements made with 100 percent USDA-certified organic ingredients. The formulas address disorders ranging from joint inflammation and anxiety to digestion and incontinence. For example, Vim & Vigor contains organic Siberian ginseng and echinacea to help increase endurance, fight fatigue and boost the immune system. Reliever Achiever contains organic chamomile and calendula with anti-inflammatory properties that can help with training stress.

According to Cindy Wegner, owner of Peaceable Kingdom Essentials, herbal remedies feed, regulate and cleanse the body naturally and enable the pet's system to heal itself.

"The main difference between alternative/herbal medicine and conventional medicine is that the latter is too concerned with treating the symptoms of disease through science and technology instead of treating the whole person or animal and the cause of the disease," said Wegner. "Alternative/herbal



Herbal supplements can address physical as well as behavioral disorders. For example, Bladder Care from Herbsmith promotes a healthy urinary environment to help prevent urinary tract infections as well as the formation of crystals or stones. Vim & Vigor from Peaceable Kingdom Essentials, for example, increases endurance and boosts the immune system.

medicine emphasizes the prevention of disease and seeks to treat the whole person or animal so as to strengthen the immune system and bring about sustained healing.”

Aromatherapy Mists

Aromatherapy is the therapeutic inhalation and topical application of pure essential oils, which are volatile oils produced within the seed, flower, leaf, bark, root or resin of aromatic plants. When inhaled, the scent molecules in these oils trigger an emotional or behavioral response in the limbic system. They can make the person or pet feel relaxed, calm or even stimulated. In addition, many essential oils contain medicinal properties, including analgesic, antibacterial, antifungal and anti-inflammatory.



Aromatherapy products use pure essential oils to trigger emotional or behavioral responses. Water-based mists, like these from Earth Heart Inc., are convenient and easy to use.

Considering the fact that dogs love to smell things, aromatherapy is an ideal natural remedy for them, said Vicki Rae Thorne, certified aromatherapist, master herbalist and owner of Earth Heart Inc. (Dundee, Ill.).

“When used correctly, remedies containing pure essential oils can be a safe and effective natural alternative to conventional remedies,” said Thorne. “Because dogs respond so well to both scent and touch, topical applications of aromatherapy remedies containing pure essential oils are quite effective. Combining aromatherapy with touch can lead to an emotional response, bonding and potential behavior modification.”

To help with an array of common issues in dogs, the company offers four aromatherapy mists: Travel Calm to relieve travel sickness; Canine Calm to ease stress; Guard Well to bolster the immune system; and Buzz Guard for protection against insects. Convenient and easy to use, these water-based mists can be sprayed directly onto skin, cloth or fur and won't leave a sticky residue.

Flower Essences

A form of homeopathy, flower essences are herbal infusions made from steeped flower blossoms. According to practitioners, they work on an energetic, vibrational level to influence mental, emotional and physical well-being. Blends are issue-specific rather than species-specific, so they can be tailored to address a full range of emotional and behavioral problems in a variety of pets.

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Rescue Remedy Pet from Nelson Bach USA Ltd. eases fear, anxiety and behavioral issues associated with stress.

Unscented and unflavored, flower essences are typically given orally. However, they also can be dispensed in water, as a mist, on food that will not quickly absorb the essence or applied topically. As with herbs, their potency increases through frequent and consistent use. This allows the effects to build up over time.

Furthermore, flower essences are completely nontoxic, do not interact with drugs and are safe to use, said Mary Ann Simonds, an animal behavioral expert and author of a 2001 study of flower essences in horses published by Rutgers University.

“Flower essences are safe to use in that they do not have any chemical that could adversely affect an animal,” said Simonds. “Oftentimes physical issues

such as allergies or skin problems are a result of deeper emotional issues such as worry. In these cases, flower essence therapy can be very effective at treating the underlying emotional condition, which led to the physical condition.”

Although flower essences have grown in popularity along with other natural products, they are nothing new. In fact, they were discovered more than 80 years ago by British bacteriologist Dr. Edward Bach. He recognized that stresses arising from negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, panic, anger and impatience could deplete a person’s general vitality and resistance to disease.

Enter Bach’s Rescue Remedy, a flower essence formula widely used across the globe for stress and anxiety. Nelson Bach USA Ltd. (North Andover, Mass.) offers a pet-specific formula, Rescue Remedy Pet, which is suitable for dogs, cats, horses and birds. It contains the extract of five flowers—star of Bethlehem, rock rose, cherry plum, impatiens and clematis—to ease fear, anxiety and behavioral issues associated with stress.

“Rescue Remedy Pet is a safe and natural way to treat pet anxiety caused by loud noises such as fireworks and thunderstorms, separation, new surroundings, vet visits and more,” said Lynn Stachnick, product manager for Nelson Bach. “As an all-natural stress reliever, it can be used to create a calming effect and help pets overcome emotional and behavioral problems.”

Arenus (St. Charles, Mo.) offers an extensive line of botanical animal flower essences that are designed to support normal emotional behavior in stressful situations, including trauma, stress, abandonment, loss, aggression and insecurity. Its 14 issue-specific formulas include In Training for improving tolerance in impatient or defiant animals; Clear Thinking for improving focus, concentration and memory; and Easy Does It for help with destructive behaviors, demands for constant attention, constant barking or whining.

According to Raquel Schilf, Arenus e-marketing coordinator, flower essences provide emotional support in specific situations and can be valuable training tools.

“Pets have emotional issues that cannot be ignored,” said Schilf. “These issues factor into their daily lives,

affecting how they relate to the world, their human caretakers and other animals. Much of the ‘bad’ behavior we see in our pets is actually caused by emotional imbalances, fears and past experiences that have affected the animals’ psychological states. Getting to the root of a pet’s emotional issues allows them to be addressed.”

Some flower essence remedies use a base of distilled water and alcohol. Arenus remedies, however, use a base of distilled water and vinegar. They also draw from a larger base of flower remedies and address a wider range of issues, said Simonds.

Herbal-Flower Essence Blends

Some natural remedies combine the benefits of herbs and flower essences. One such example is Sleepytime Tonic, offered by EcoWellDog Inc. (Austin, Texas). Made with 15 different herbs and flowers, including skullcap, valerian, aspen and impatiens, this sweet-tasting liquid remedy helps calm active dogs. It also eases anxiety in stressful situations, including separation from an owner, trips to the groomer and vet, travel, thunderstorms and fireworks, according to Lorna Paxton Ladd, president of EcoWellDog.

“Tonics are a great first step in solving a problem,” said Ladd. “There aren’t side effects, you don’t have to worry about giving too much, they are over-the-counter and in many cases they take care of the problem so you can avoid a



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Sleepytime Tonic from EcoWellDog Inc. combines the benefits of herbs and flower essences.

NELSON BACH USA LTD.; ARENIUS; ECOWELLDOG INC.

costly trip to the vet. Sleepytime Tonic is unique because it is the only one that is a blend of both flower essences and herbs so you are getting the best of both worlds.”

Administered orally or added to food or treats, the fast-acting formula calms dogs down in as little as 20 minutes, she added.

Selling Natural Health Remedies

Marketing and selling plant-based remedies successfully is all about education—for yourself, your staff and your customers, said Jennifer Fadal, owner of Wag Natural Pet Market in Tampa, Fla., who has sold natural remedies since opening her store seven years ago.

“It’s a whole new market for a lot of stores, so there will be a learning curve,” said Fadal. “But the good news is that a lot of the good companies out there offer a lot of seminars for consumers and retailers, so you can go online and participate with them or download their literature and learn from their website.

These companies understand that people need to learn and be educated, so they’re very customer service-friendly and open to questions.”

To further educate customers, provide talking points on your shelves as well as brochures that reference manufacturer websites.

To promote consumer interest and increase sales, set up a wellness section or a special area just for remedies, with products grouped or paired in issue-specific categories, Fadal suggested.

For example, you could do a whole joint-specific display featuring a food with glucosamine and chondroitin, a complementary supplement and perhaps a treat that has glucosamine.

“A whole system like that is very effective. You can do that with skin and coat and digestion—there are so many opportunities for retailers to get the

message across,” said Fadal.

Another idea: Host a wellness day at your store so manufacturers can come in and talk to your customers about the benefits of natural remedies, she added.

In addition to explaining how and when to use natural remedies, make sure customers understand that they are not a quick fix.

“[Natural remedies are] a long-term solution,” said Fadal. “They have to build up in the system of the pet, so it has to be consistent. And, of course, you’ll see better results if you’re feeding your animal a holistic diet, giving them exercise and plenty of water and doing all the other things the right way. Supplements will make it all that much better.” ■

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