

Week of June 11

By Sage Sassafras

Chocolate Be Gone

Everyone knows that chocolate is bad for dogs, right?

When you think of chocolate, you think of a yummy rich chocolate bar, piece of cake or a little kiss. How many people think of Mulch? Yes mulch – cocoa mulch. Cocoa mulch is the by-product of the chocolate industry, the husk of the spent (used) cocoa beans. It smells yummy in the garden, and therein lies the problem. Dogs are attracted to the smell and if they ingest too much of the mulch, they can get sick, make that very sick. And the smaller the dog (think curious puppies who eat anything) the sicker they can get.

To get technical: Cocoa beans contain the stimulants caffeine and theobromine and dogs (and cats, but they are smarter and don't eat the mulch!) are highly sensitive to these chemicals, called methylxanthines. In humans, theobromine acts as a mild diuretic and stimulant. In dogs, low doses of methylxanthine can cause mild gastrointestinal upset (vomiting, diarrhea, and/or abdominal pain); higher doses can cause rapid heart rate, muscle tremors, seizures and even death. Cocoa mulch can contain 300-1200 mg. of theobromine, making it one of the strongest concentrations of theobromine a pet is likely to encounter.

According to Hershey (producer of cocoa mulch): "It is true that studies have shown that 50% of dogs that eat Cocoa Mulch can suffer physical harm to a variety of degrees (depending on each individual dog). However 98% of all dogs won't eat it" In contrast the ASPCA said that in their studies that only 33% of the dogs showed no clinical signs of illness. The ASPCA ultimately concluded that "Pet owners should avoid (the) use of cocoa bean mulch in landscaping around dogs with indiscriminate eating habits".

From my experience of using cocoa mulch in one small area of the garden a few years ago, that area of the garden got more visitations from the neighborhood cats and visiting dogs than any other area. Coincidence? It smelled like Hershey Pennsylvania. And I did catch one dog eating a chip but I stopped him at one gulp. He was ok, but the chips were history, never to return.

Bottom line: Avoid the use cocoa mulch when you have pets – your own or the neighbors. And keep the chocolate bars, ice cream, cake, kisses for yourself.

Two PS's: if you suspect your pet has eaten cocoa mulch, the ASPCA recommends contacting your veterinarian immediately or calling the Animal Poison Control Center at 1-888-426-4435 for expert advice. Only treatment at this time is induced vomiting.

Some manufacturers of cocoa mulch now proclaim that their products are "Theobromine-free" and pet safe. Better safe than sorry – choose sustainable wood-based mulch – it can smell yummy too!

Happy gardening and don't forget to check out the website www.woodstockgardenclub.org. Remember that Mother Nature needs all the coddling we can give her.