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Essential Oils: Natural Insect Repellent for Dogs

BY NAYANA MORAG

Looking for a natural insect repellent? Check out the best essential oils for protecting your dog against insect pests.

Fleas are a fact of life for many dogs during the warm weather months. Disease-carrying ticks and mosquitoes have also become a significant problem in many regions over the last number of years. But before resorting to potent chemicals to protect your dog against these blood-sucking pests, know that essential oils and hydrosols can be used as a natural insect repellent to fight against fleas, ticks and mosquitoes. Not only do they actively repel bugs, but unlike chemical treatments, they help improve your dog's overall well-being at the same time.



Healthy dogs, fed fresh whole food diets, are more able to resist bugs. By contrast, a poor diet, high stress levels, chemical flea treatments and vaccines lower immunity and make infestation, irritation and illness more likely. However, even the healthiest dog can succumb to bugs in some climates and seasons. That's when it makes sense to reach for aromatic extracts such as essential oils and hydrosols to help protect your pup.

6 effective pest-repelling oils

Many essential oils are natural insect repellents, and some are actually insecticidal. Below are a few of the most commonly available, inexpensive and effective oils. Make sure you use high quality essential oils from a company that sells to aromatherapists. Essential oils sold by supermarket chains or similar are generally of very poor quality and more than likely adulterated, increasing the chances of an allergic reaction.

1. Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*)

This well-known and much beloved essential oil can be used as a natural insect repellent to deter fleas and other crawling bugs. It also soothes the irritation of flea bites. Because of its sedative properties, it's good for dogs who are overly excitable or nervous.

2. Cedarwood (*Cedrus Atlantica*)

Cedarwood is a true insecticide, and its use is recorded throughout history. It is one of my mainstays for keeping fleas and mosquitoes at bay. It is also calming and grounding.

3. Geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*)

Geranium is one of my favorite oils to use in a tick repellent blend, and it also repels lice and fleas. It is cooling and relaxing.

4. Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*)

One of the best bug repellents we have, just a tiny amount of lemongrass oil is very effective. It is also good for arthritis and digestive problems.

5. Eucalyptus (lemon or narrow leaf, *Eucalyptus citriodora or radiata*)

This oil is particularly effective against flying bugs, including mosquitoes.

6. Lavender tea tree (also known as swamp paperbark or rosalina, *Melaleuca ericifolia*)

This is a gentler version of the well-known tea tree oil (*Melaleuca alternifolia*). Regular tea tree can cause temporary paralysis in some dogs, so I prefer the milder version, which repels fleas and ticks, and helps heal minor skin injuries.

Make your own natural insect repellent

Bug repellents made specifically for your dog, with his help, are more effective than any commercial repellent. What's more, they have no unpleasant side effects and boost the immune system instead of suppressing it. And they're fun to make!

The most basic way to make a lotion is to mix a few drops of essential oil into unscented aloe vera gel then thin the aloe vera gel to lotion consistency with filtered water (see recipe sidebar).

To increase the power of the potion, you can also add cold-pressed neem seed oil (*Azadirachta Indica*), one of nature's strongest insecticides. Essential oils evaporate quickly, so they don't last very long on their own. But neem lingers, staying active for a few days. Many people find the smell of neem unpleasant, even offensive. But it really works and has been shown to be effective at 1% dilution, so you only need a little. I use sweet-smelling essential oils to help mask the neem smell. Geranium, lemongrass and lavender tea tree are some of my favorites. You could also use patchouli (*Pogostomen cablin*) or ylang ylang (*Cananga odorata*). But, again, each dog has his own preference, so let him decide using the method described in the sidebar.

What if he doesn't like essential oils?

Some dogs just don't like essential oils. If your dog runs away when you pull out the oil bottles, here are some ways you can still protect him without rubbing the oils into his coat.

- Add a few drops of lemongrass hydrosol to his water bowl. This inhibits fleas and mosquitoes.

- Add a few squirts of the lotion recipe to a bucket ¼ full of water, to make a coat conditioning/flea repelling wash. Wet your dog down first, then sponge the conditioner on his coat, leaving it to air dry.
- Use a hydrosol spray for daily applications, or around the face to protect from mosquitoes. Dilute a hydrosol such as eucalyptus or lavender (or both) 50/50 with distilled water.
- If you are going to a bug-infested area, spray a kerchief with diluted bug repellent lotion and tie it around his neck. Remove the kerchief when you return home. *[Editor's note: A kerchief can get snagged on branches, fences, etc., so don't use this method if your dog is going to run off-leash.]*

When it comes to essential oils, always keep in mind that more isn't better. Be sure to use the minimum amount and apply only when needed. If used undiluted or too often, essential oils can overwhelm a dog's system and lead to allergic reactions. But if you allow your dog to help guide you to how, when and which oils to use, you'll keep his immune system in tip-top shape, ready to repel fleas, ticks and mosquitoes, and avoid the diseases they often carry.

Sample recipe for pest-repelling lotion

¼ cup aloe vera gel

¼ tsp neem oil

3 drops cedarwood essential oil

3 drops lavender essential oil

3 drops lemongrass essential oil

The final gel should be the consistency of hair conditioner, so slowly stir in up to ¼ cup filtered water or geranium hydrosol.

This recipe makes half a cup of lotion. Rub a small amount through your dog's coat every few days. Concentrate on the places pest congregate, such as in his ruff, between the legs and around the ears. Reapply after swimming, or if you know you are going to a bug-infested area.

Adding geranium oil to this recipe may enhance its tick repellent properties. This recipe can be made into a spray by adding the ingredients to an 8 oz. glass or metal spray bottle containing distilled or filtered water. Witch hazel extract and/or apple cider vinegar are commonly added to homemade repellent sprays for their skin nourishing properties, while also helping keep the bugs away. ACV also promotes healthy skin pH.

Sample flea & tick repellent recipe

5 tbsp sweet almond oil

4-5 drops lavender oil

4-5 drops lemon oil

4-5 drops rose geranium oil (If rose geranium is unavailable, geranium oil is appropriate)

This recipe can be made into a larger batch and either added to a spray bottle or placed in a bowl to apply liberally when camping or spending time outdoors with a group.

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This article has been amended to include additional information and sample recipes.