

Living With Farm Dogs

Farm dogs are like floral arrangements: They bring the outdoors in! Learn some tricks to keep your home clean when you live with dogs.

Muddy paws, shed hair and dried manure—that's what farm dogs are made of!

Those not-always-beautiful, but-always-hardworking farm companions end their days as beat up as their people do. But farmers get to leave their boots outside; dogs, unfortunately, don't have that privilege.

Is it even possible to keep your house clean while inviting your four-legged ranch hands inside? Absolutely!

The Transition: Using the Mud Room

There are two words of wisdom when it comes to allowing farm dogs into the farmhouse: mud room. Without a mud room, or something to act like a mud room, keeping the farm outside of the house can be nearly impossible.

There's a good reason that many houses in the Northwest are built with mud rooms. If you work or play outdoors, you're going to get wet; if you're a dog, you're going to get muddy.

But a mud room is universally sensible—it's a place for Southwest ranch dogs to have the sand and dust brushed from their coats and a place for Midwest hunting dogs to get the last bit of snow out from between their toe pads.

Courtesy Plow and Hearth

Want more tips?

Audrey Pavia's Animal Talk column offers news, advice and more for animals around the farm. For a few excerpts just for farm dog owners, click to continue ...

The mud room is the best spot in the house to give your dog a once-over and remove burrs from ears and compacted dirt from feet. If you don't have a mud room, then a porch, sunroom, laundry room, basement or attached garage works just as well.

"Our solution to the farm dogs in the house is that we have a mud room where the dogs go to dry off if they get really muddy," says Anne Jespersen, who lives in Custer, Wis., and has eight Australian shepherds, all of whom work or have worked on their small farm where they raise lambs for custom butchering. "A few hours nap and the mud has usually fallen off enough that they can come in the house."

Mud rooms are also good places to hang leashes and other doggy accoutrements. Install hooks for leashes and dog blankets, and have a box for things like dog brushes, nail clippers, and canine toothbrushes and toothpaste.

Keep two boxes for towels in the mud room. One is for clean, folded towels, the other is for soiled towels.

© Karen Keb Acevedo

On dry days, use a towel to whisk off extra dirt and sand and get any packed-in dirt from between paws. On rainy days, use several to thoroughly clean and dry your pup. Make a habit of emptying and refilling the boxes on a semi-weekly basis.

"We have an area on the porch with a bucket of water and towels for cleaning up the dogs in the winter," says Sunny DeYoung, who has five Bouviers and lives on a farm in Glenwood City, Wis. "We soak the dogs' legs in the water to get snowballs off their legs and feet."

Place a door mat outside the mud room and also between the mud room and the house. Instead of using a cutesy, novelty

door mat, invest in a serious, heavy-duty door mat that will actually get the crud off your boots as well as off your four-legged family members' paws.

In addition to a mud room, many farmers with dogs keep areas of the house separated with doggy or baby gates. "My parents have a different solution," says Jespersen. "They allow the dogs in the kitchen, but not the rest of the house. This at least keeps the mess contained to one area that can be swept out easily."

Farmhouse Dog Do's

© Bonnie Suelf you live with a farm dog, here are some pooch preparations that will help: Clip her nails. Clipped nails will cut down on snags (painful for the dog and the furniture) and help ameliorate some floor scratches.

Groom her. Dogs with long coats that track in mud can be trimmed to curb the mess. DeYoung clips her Bouviers' coats short most of the year. "Not only do they drag in less dirt," says DeYoung, "but we can also keep burrs to a minimum. We also keep their beards cut—Bouviers are nicknamed 'dirty beard' for a reason!" Dean specifically chooses his Kelpie and cattle dog mix dogs for their short coat: "Because dairies have infinitely more wet, sloppy manure for dogs to play in than do drylot feed yards or open pastures, I prefer short-haired dogs that are wash and wear."

Brush daily. Brushing at least once a day will really cut down on the hair she sheds and the amount of dirt she carries with her.

Bathe monthly. It's not good to bathe your dog with shampoo more than once a month. As long as she doesn't roll in something dead or especially smelly, stick to hosing her off without shampoo. When Dean's herding dogs get too mucky, he rinses them with a milk hose before allowing them in the house.

Consider a coat. When living in a rainy climate like Oregon, Wessel keeps her dogs dry with doggy raincoats. More like horse blankets than chi-chi doggy fashion accessories, dog coats protect fur from rain and wind; some are also reflective for night work.

Teach her house manners. Training for living in a home is somewhat different than training for life on a farm. Before you even begin housetraining, buy a crate and crate train your dog. It will be a great help when you need to keep her separate. Teach basic commands, such as "sit," "down" and "stay." A puppy kindergarten or basic dog-training class can help you establish housetraining and other basic training for house life.

Designate an "eating" spot. If you feed your dog inside, give her her own food and water bowls, and keep them on a mat. Almost every pet supply store sells mats for food bowls. She's hungry, she's thirsty, she's tired—it's almost guaranteed that she's going to slobber and make a mess around her food bowl.

Provide toys. Make sure she has some toys of her own so that when she starts getting bored, she opts to play with them instead of making a toy out of something that is definitely not a toy (i.e., the chair legs, the remote control, your shoes).

Give her a bed. Even if she sleeps in a crate, give her a soft dog bed for relaxing. This gives her a "safe" spot in the house that is hers alone. It keeps her out from underfoot, offers her an option other than your furniture and gives her a time-out area.

Top

Patrick Dean, a professional bovine hoof trimmer in Columbia City, Ind., allows his three herding dogs into the kitchen, living room and office in his home.

"These rooms all have the same run of high-quality, wood laminate flooring that is scratch resistant and easy to clean," he explains. Before allowing the dogs into the house, however, each is individually towel dried and cleaned. Dean keeps a stack of clean terrycloth towels on a shelf ready for use and a milk crate on the floor to throw the soiled towels into.

Top

What to Do About Floors

With the amount of dirt that a rural dog encounters in a day, it's nearly impossible to keep carpets clean. Wood floors are

more convenient, but soft woods, like pine, are easily scratched by doggy nails.

Some farm dog owners still opt for carpet, rationalizing that they can vacuum daily and steam clean weekly or bi-weekly, but that's a lot of work. Tracy Wessel of Dundee, Ore., works as a farm manager and caretaker and doesn't get much choice over flooring.

Although she says her dream floors would be unfinished travertine, she currently contends with wall-to-wall carpeting by using floor runners and utility rugs to soak up most of the mud from her two Belgian sheepdogs. She has the carpets professionally cleaned once every three months and spot cleans regularly.

Hardwood flooring fares better than softwood floors; however, it will still pick up little nicks and dents from dog nails, especially if your pooches tend to play hard. DeYoung has Amish-milled hickory flooring in her kitchen, where her dogs spend a good deal of time. She mops the floors regularly and uses handwoven rag rugs, which she washes frequently.

"We do see gouges in the floor over time," she admits, but adds, "Our philosophy is that if you can't have character in a rural Wisconsin farmhouse, where can you?"

Vinyl floors are terrible for doggy nails because they're easily dinged and ripped, but linoleum, especially the Swiss product, Marmoleum, is a farm-dog owner's dream come true. It looks nice, with a range of colors to choose from, is extremely durable and doggy nails won't leave scratches. It's also easy to clean and hypoallergenic. For those of you living organically, the new linoleum is actually a green product, made of linseed oil and natural materials such as cork, wood or jute.

Natural stone floorings have become very popular. These tend to be expensive, but slate, travertine and granite are all fairly easy to clean and durable. They look rustic and any new chips or dings just add to their appeal. Tile also continues to be popular, but it can be a little slick for dog paws. These floors just need regular sweeping and mopping to keep them looking their best.

Top

Choosing the Right Rug

If you opt for a non-carpeted floor, you'll want some rugs to soften things up a bit. But we've all seen what rambunctious dogs can do to a nice rug: By the time they're done playing with it, it's brown with dirt and wadded in a ball in the corner.

Instead of choosing a rug that is simply decorative, consider how durable and stable it is. Plow and Hearth sells a range of super-durable, indoor/outdoor rugs that are also attractive. Made in all shapes and sizes, the rugs can be used to cozy up the living room or family room and for kitchen and mud room utility rugs. The best thing about them? When they get dirty, you can simply take them outside and hose them off.

Loose rugs are attractive chew toys that are also dangerous for playing pooches and kids, so always use a carpet pad to adhere the rug to the floor. Use an outdoor pad with indoor/outdoor rugs.

Top

Choosing the Right Upholstery

City dogs might track a bit of dirt or leaves onto couches and chairs, and even low-shedding dogs shed a little, but farm dogs are a special case. After a day in the paddock, they might have burrs, mud, dirt and dried manure stuck in their fur and paws. Most have copious fur, which often sheds in copious amounts.

If you want upholstered furniture that your dog can lounge on, don't bother with wool, cotton, velvet and brocade. Dog-friendly furniture means cleanable. Leather is sturdy and easy to wash. Pretty much anything a dog brings in can be wiped off with a sponge. Vinyl and synthetic plastic leathers, commonly called pleather, are also easy to clean, but aren't as durable. Sharp dog claws can puncture and shred these fabrics.

There are a number of other materials that are purported to be pet-friendly, including ultrasuede and other microfiber fabrics. Crypton Super Fabric is a new material that claims to be water-, stain- and bacteria-resistant. It's marketed to "extreme families" and may just be the perfect fabric for families with farm dogs. If your furniture store doesn't stock these fabrics, you can usually special-order them.

Slipcovers have long been the designer's answer to pet-friendly and stylish design. However, a messy, ill-fitting slipcover

can look worse than a dirty, hair-covered couch. If you go the slipcover route, buy dark colors (unless you happen to have a Great Pyrenees), buy quality and buy in quantity. One will always be dirty.

If you allow your dog on the bed, use a washable duvet or bedspread. Wessel tosses an old flannel sheet over her bedding and then throws it into the wash after a few nights of doggy co-sleeping. Wash duvets or bedspreads at least once a week.

Orvis offer their dog-friendly “Three Dog Night” bedding sets, which include comforters, duvets, coverlets and entire bedding ensembles. All bedding is designed to protect your bed linens from hair, dirt, snags and accidents from your four-legged friends.

Top

Cleaning Up After Your Dog

Is that what you think it is on the living room floor? Sometimes the house still gets dirty, despite your best efforts to prevent it. There are muddy paw prints on the floor, dog hair on the couch and, well, other indignities.

No matter. In the last few years, a bevy of new dog clean-up products have hit the market. These products fight against the scourges of dogdom: hair, dirt and, yes, bodily fluids.

If your dog urinates, defecates or vomits in the house, first wipe up the offending substance, then treat the area liberally with one of the enzymatic cleaning products available at pet supply stores or online catalogs. The best known is Nature’s Miracle, but there are a number of them out there. These products work by using “good” bacteria to consume “bad” bacteria. Most of these products can be used on upholstery as well, but be sure to do a spot test first.

The best match for dog hair is a vacuum—even if you don’t have carpeting. Buy the best vacuum you can afford. Sibo and Miele make high-quality vacuums that are highly recommended by multiple-pet families. Anecdotally, canister, rather than upright, vacuums have better suction; what you may sacrifice in convenience will be made up for in effectiveness. Dyson makes a vacuum specifically for pet hair called the Dyson Animal Vac. Be forewarned: Very good vacuum cleaners are expensive, starting around \$500 and going up to more than \$1,000.

Top

The Farm Dog Life

Ultimately, most farmers whose dogs live in the home say that a little imperfection is just part of the life they have chosen. Terry Kenney, who lives with his nine dogs on a small farm in Leona Valley, Calif., sums it up: “I am a bigger culprit than my dogs: muddy boots, wet slickers, alfalfa flakes shedding off of jackets ... pliers in the back pocket ripping sofa fabric. The dogs are a minor issue.”

About the Author

Kristin Mehus-Roe, author of *The Original Dog Bible: The Definitive Source to All Things Dog* (Bowtie Press, 2005) and *Working Dogs: True Stories of Dogs and Their Handlers* (Bowtie Press, 2003), writes from Seattle, Wash.

This article first appeared in the Fall/Winter 2007 issue of Hobby Farm Home magazine. [Subscribe online](#)>>