

The four-legged gardener

With natural pruning skills and a thorough love of dirt, Ricky offers enthusiastic, if unskilled, assistance.

Not long ago, my friend Charlotte adopted Ricky, a half-grown golden retriever. Like any adolescent, he is growing fast and has lots of restless energy, as well as a tendency to damage things without meaning to.

Charlotte is a true dog lover, but sometimes she looks at him and sighs. I suggested she channel Ricky's energies into gardening.

Gardeners live by the words "Dig a \$10 hole for a \$5 plant." Ricky has done that instinctively from the first time he enlarged a small chipmunk hole into a crater roomy enough for a young hydrangea. Talent like that doesn't come along every day. When you combine it with physical fitness, a complete lack of concern about getting dirty or wet, and a take-charge attitude, you have the makings of an excellent gardener.

Charlotte agrees that all Ricky needs now is proper training.

With a little positive reinforcement from the right person, I am sure Ricky could learn that holes are best made in established garden beds. Once he gets that message, Charlotte can even loan him out to friends who want to install new landscaping.

Despite a lack of opposable thumbs, Ricky already prunes shrubs and small trees with great enthusiasm and thoroughness. Grasping woody trunks in his teeth, he either bites them off or, if they are especially resistant, yanks them out by the roots. I often have similar impulses.

A skillful garden coach/dog whisperer could teach Ricky to prune more carefully, biting off overgrown branches, wrenching out root suckers and reshaping bulky shrubs. He may never refine his technique enough to prune formal hedges or create topiary, but that is fine. Every dog knows that you have to leave some tasks to humans, or they will get bored and cause trouble.

Ricky is also very effective at creating situations that are inherently stressful to plants. I think he would excel at evaluating new varieties. In his own backyard he has already pruned a rosebush, a maple sapling, and several young rhododendrons back to the ground. All have grown back from their roots – a clear indication of exceptional toughness and resilience. Last year he flattened a large number of mature perennials.

Now Charlotte rests secure in the knowledge that her plant choices are hardy enough to rebound and rebloom. Her husband, who has been a bit slow to appreciate Ricky's unique skills, even suggested that she capitalize on his accomplishments by launching a trademarked line of Ricky-tested and approved plants.

With all of his horticultural skills, Ricky clearly has a great future in beds and borders. There is only one danger – overexposure. One of Charlotte's neighbors has threatened to make a video of Ricky pruning a shrub and upload it to YouTube. Charlotte fears it will go viral, and suddenly people from everywhere will want to hire Ricky to deal with their own landscaping challenges.

There is only one Ricky. If the cat gets out of the bag, there may not be enough dog to go around.

By Elisabeth Ginsburg