

RUFF THE GARDEN DOG

Prancing behind the glass, tail erect, eyes bright, the little Cairn Terrier caught our hearts. A few tears flowed down our cheeks. It had been two years since our Golden Retriever named Goldie and our Cairn Terrier named Todo had left for doggie heaven. We knew. We knew even before the attendant handed the bundle of pride to our waiting arms. We had to go out of town for a week, but we didn't want someone else to get him, so we paid on the spot and worked a deal with the pet store to board him till we got back.

When we returned, we immediately went to the pet store to bring our new buddy home. How the attendant knew we were coming, I don't know, but he stood there holding our puppy as we walked into the store.

After a few months, Ruff began running through the grass instead of hopping over it. We also noticed about that time his interest in gardening beginning to grow.

One day I grabbed a shovel and set out to plant a few shrubs in the backyard. About halfway through the first hole, Ruff came over to me,

sniffed the shovel, sniffed the pile of dirt, and looked up at me and said, “This looks like fun. Can I help?” Without waiting for an answer, he jumped down into the hole and began to kick out dirt quite vigorously. I let him continue as it made less work for me. After a while, he jumped up out of the hole and looked at me again.

“Didn’t I do good, Daddy?” he asked me in canine body language.

When I put the shovel back down in the hole to make it just a little deeper, he would have none of it. Using doggie deductive reasoning, he concluded that he had more work to do, and he jumped back into the hole. I finally assured him it was good enough and picked him up out of the hole.

Having worked up a respectable doggie thirst, Ruff headed for his water bowl. He came back and watched me pushing the soil back around the new plant. Once again, he felt the need to help. Unfortunately, his accuracy didn’t match his enthusiasm. But what can I say? He had only begun his puppy gardening probation period. By the afternoon’s end, it became apparent that both of us would need a bath.

Ruff's enthusiasm for pulling weeds equaled his planting enthusiasm. After a minute of observation, he joined me in the chore. He would pull up the weed with his mouth and take off, shaking it vigorously, so that no excess dirt remained on the weed. Now I know some of you may wonder how I kept him from pulling up good plants as well. You must consider that God gave him the skills, and I merely nursed along his discernment with a few plant ID sessions and an occasional emphasis such as "no" or "ut" when required.

As winter's end approached, I decided to expand my sprinkler system for the spring growing season. I laid out the pipes where I wanted them and began gluing the parts together. Ruff went over and picked up a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch tee with his mouth and dropped it on my shoe.

"Ruff, that's a tee," I said. "I need a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch coupler. Go grab one and bring it here."

Believe it or not, he ran over and picked up a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch coupler and brought it straight to ... me.

"Thank you, Ruff ..."

Okay, maybe I could have said, "Ruff, bring back that coupler, as he gleefully ran around the backyard with it in his mouth." It could have been

my fault. I probably didn't speak clearly enough at the time.

One of Ruff's favorite gardening activities involved spreading landscape rock in some of the plant beds. His personal favorite type of rock was egg rock, as it fit perfectly into a Cairn Terrier's mouth. He would survey a bed and then make a selection of rock. After a few times around the backyard, he'd pause to have a closer look and then make a few more passes. He'd finally decide which bed needed the rock the most and then deposit it. A few years later, we made a move to Missouri and, of course, we had to bring an egg rock along so he could have it for old time's sake. (You never know, they could run out of rock in the Ozarks.)

Not limited to installation work, Ruff also excelled in sprinkler maintenance. When it came time to run a scheduled sprinkler head check, he eagerly volunteered his expertise. When a zone came on, he immediately (with exceeding great joy, I might add) went to work testing each head. My wife said he's just trying to bite the water coming out of the head because he doesn't like the sound. I say au contraire. I believe he's using his mouth to test the water pressure as it comes out of the head. It's a proven fact that dogs have some exceptional senses

that we mere humans don't. I'm not sure that I can point to any specific scientific study that gauges a dog's ability to sense the level of water pressure with their mouth, but I'm sure there must have been a government grant out there funding such a study. The bottom line is that, despite being totally soaked from snout to tail, he never complains a bit.

Efficiently completing most gardening projects requires well-maintained gardening equipment. When it came time to move around the farm, I found it most efficient to use a small utility vehicle. I purchased a used 2-cylinder unit with a dump bed. A frequent occupant of the passenger seat on trips around the garden, Ruff continued to amaze me with his extraordinary and often underappreciated skills. He dutifully sat surveying his domain as I loaded the bed with garden materials. When I started the engine up, he would immediately begin to howl. For a while I couldn't figure out why he did that, but then it hit me. I believe, with his super sensitive canine hearing, that he detected a misfire in cylinder # 2 and that was his way of communicating such. When I removed the spark plug from cylinder # 2, it became quite apparent that the thick coating of carbon had caused it to misfire. My wife said he was just howling because the noise hurt his

ears and he didn't like it. The evidence is far too coincidental for me. I prefer my own conclusion.

When my little gardening assistant finally passed away, I found it most appropriate to bury his ashes in the garden beneath a freshly planted 'Angel Face' rose.