

Does the Carpet Match My Dog? Pet-Friendly Amenities Attract Home Buyers

Christina McCarthy and her husband had a good feeling about the house. It was priced right and located in a quiet Westminster, Colo. neighborhood. When the young couple ventured into the backyard, they realized they'd found the home of their dreams.

"A cat door led out into a fenced-in part of the yard," McCarthy explains. "There were two pear trees with a network of perches for a cat to climb up on and play. Chicken wire covered the top so the cat couldn't get out and other animals couldn't come in. The owner even planted a catnip garden. It was like a kitty amusement park."



The McCarthys, proud parents of Goose and Jack, would no longer have to worry about letting out their two cats or walking them on a leash.

"We thought, 'Wow! This was meant to be,'" the delighted homeowner recalls. "The little playground was an awesome bonus to a wonderful home."

Because more households have pets than children, a growing number of realtors are targeting home buyers like the McCarthys.

"People are treating their pets like a human member of the family," says Kati Harken, an associate with Keller Williams Realty in Englewood, Colo. "They're taking into account amenities for their animals, including proximity to dog parks, veterinary hospitals or doggie day care centers."

Harken, who has four dogs, says marketing to pet owners gives her a competitive advantage in today's difficult real estate market.

"It's another way for me to connect on a personal level with my clients," she says. "They know I can identify with their needs and concerns."

**Before You Buy: Take Your Dog
for a "Test Drive"**

Home builders are also getting in on the act. Many are incorporating unique features, such as dog bathing/grooming rooms, built-in food and water bowls and pet-sized window seats.

Architects of The Spire, a 42-story condo tower in downtown Denver, included a “Puppy Penthouse” in their master plan. If the weather is bad, a tenant need only take the elevator to the third floor, where a 1,000-sq ft dog park — complete with splash pool — awaits.



“We’re seeing more pet owners copy the innovative features they see at pet spas, pet hotels and doggie day care centers,” says Rhona Sutter, founder of the Pet Realty Network in Naples, Fla. “They want to have those same amenities in the comfort of their own homes.

“I’ve seen spaces built in laundry rooms to bathe the dog that are bigger than my bathroom,” she adds. “I mean, I should live like this!”

Pet owners are also using their creativity to meet the special needs of their four-footed friends. To accommodate her lovable but extremely large Great Dane, Shari Guess, a realtor with Buy Wise Real Estate in Texas, built a custom-made dog door out of a semitrailer truck’s mud flap.

Sutter expects the trend for pet-friendly amenities to continue as pet ownership grows among empty nesters, those who live alone and those who work at home. She says some owners are even decorating their homes according to their animals.

“You know how people like to coordinate their carpet with a sofa or drapes?” she asks. “I was at a department store the other day and met a woman looking for a rug for her study. She wanted it to match the color of her dog.”

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Before you sign a contract for a new house or condo, Sutter says to check out if there are any restrictions on pet ownership.

“A condo board in New York recently spent \$100,000 in legal fees to prevent a resident from keeping her little Yorkshire terrier,” Sutter says. “I can see why someone might not want you to have a boa constrictor, but there are some associations that won’t allow birds because they are too noisy.”

“Also, if you’re interested in a particular neighborhood, stop by on a weekend and take your dog for a ‘test drive,’” advises Harken. “Go for a walk to get a good sense of how pet-friendly the community really is.”