

Dog Houses: Design and Construction

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Building a doghouse that is just right for your dog can be fun and rewarding. However, if it is done without a plan and an understanding of how it fulfills its purpose and function, it can be a disaster. Talk to ten different dog people and you will probably get at least ten different plans for dog houses, all of which are promised to be perfect. If you do construct a doghouse that fulfills your dog's needs perfectly, none of these ten experts will be ready to quickly criticize your architectural dream. We deal with many breeders who have outdoor facilities and they get to the same end in many different ways. Some just make more mistakes than others along the path. When building a doghouse, you must consider the proper size, design, building materials, construction, placement, and bedding for the doghouse.



To fulfill the needs of its canine occupant, the doghouse need not be plush or complicated. A doghouse's purpose is to allow its occupant to be dry, out of the wind, cool in summer, warm in winter, and provide it with a place to feel safe. Remember, we practice in northern Wisconsin where temperatures can easily range from 100° to -40°F. Therefore, a doghouse built in this climate to accomplish these purposes will probably function anywhere in the United States.

How dry I am

The primary function of a doghouse is to be dry and stay dry. Nothing can stop Rover from tracking in some water on a rainy day, but that really is not the main concern. Assuming the house is waterproof, the major problem from water in a doghouse (or in any enclosed kennel building) is humidity. When humidity rises, bacteria and viruses can easily become airborne and carried in atmospheric microdroplets. This is obvious in a kennel building housing several animals where there is inadequate air exchange or turnover. It gets stuffy and humid and disease problems increase, especially respiratory ones like bronchitis, and pneumonias. Even parasites are more of a problem with humidity at these levels. Clean this building with a high pressure hose using hot water and it gets even worse. Kennel buildings need a way to get rid of the humidity and replace it with fresh air. Sometimes this can be accomplished by opening windows and doors, but often it is necessary to utilize exhaust fans. It is the same in a single house. Put one dog in the correct-sized doghouse with a tight door and you will see problems caused by excess humidity. The house has to breathe...either through the walls or via a door that is partially open or with some form of louvers. Wood houses because of the properties of this material, usually breathe to a certain degree. Add a cloth or canvas flap-type door or a metal one with vents and you have eliminated humidity as a problem.

It's too hot in here

Every year, we have a client that has just moved into the area and builds the "ultimate canine palace." He builds a very large, wooden doghouse, puts 3 to 4 inches of fiberglass insulation in the walls and roof, paints it to match their home, and adds an electric heat pad or lamp to keep it at a toasty 72°F. Winter arrives and on nights when the temperature drops below zero, the owner turns on the heat. However, the shorthaired Doberman, understanding his own needs and comfort level, decides to sleep in the snow. He is probably more comfortable there than he would be in the palace.

People often do not realize just how well their dog can cope with the elements. Dogs, unlike humans, have their own built-in-insulation in the form of body hair. Shorthaired dogs have the same ability to keep warm as longhaired dogs. This is because their hair is different. Take the Doberman for instance. His hair is short but very stout. In fact, it is hollow. In the hair shaft are air pockets, the perfect insulating material. Now look at an English Setter. He has lots of fine, longer hair. His insulation is provided by the air pockets between layers of hair, sometimes referred to as undercoat and outercoat. We are not saying the Dobermans will not shiver on a cold day (which is nature's way of increasing body heat), but we have seen Setters and Malamutes do the same.

All the Doberman above wanted or needed was a place to get out of the cold, and to him that probably meant getting out of the wind. He curls up inside a snowdrift to protect him from the wind and provide insulation, allowing the use of his body heat to stay warm. He did not want to be hot and after becoming used to the decreasing temperature during the fall, he was ready to deal with winter. Unless a doghouse is going to be used for whelping, we never put any heat source in it.

Too-o-o-o-o- big

Other problems with the above "palace" were probably its size and the use of the insulation. Look at the amount of space your dog takes up when he curls up and lies down. Draw a rectangle around him that is three inches larger on all sides and it is probably the perfect size for the inside of his house (twelve inches on all sides if the house will be used for whelping). Remember, his body is going to provide the heat that will keep his home warm. If it is too large, that cannot be done. For height, four to six inches taller than his shoulders is perfect. He will not mind lowering his head.

Insulation is a poor bedtime snack

The insulation, if it is exposed, can be a disaster waiting to happen. If the dog becomes bored, he is liable to eat it and the stiff material consistently forms partial or complete obstructions in the intestines. Insulation is fine, but the best is the same we found in the hair coats of the dogs. That is a hollow wall formed by an inner and outer layer with dead airspace in between. It will help keep the dog warm in the winter and cool in the summer. But most importantly, it will breathe, permitting excess humidity to pass through the walls. Fiberglass insulation can actually trap moisture leading to rotting wood and even sicker

dogs.

The lucky dog has a house of wood or plastic

The materials we prefer for the homemade dog house can be purchased at any building supply store or lumber yard. As the primary constituent, wood is preferred for at least the inside layer. It can be disinfected to a certain degree, but this can be improved with enamel and/or epoxy paints. Some of the new prefabricated, high impact plastic houses possess the same excellent features. They use a double wall thickness, have good ventilation, and are very easy to clean and disinfect. We have seen concrete blocks used by those who are attempting to build a permanent, never-to-be-replaced model. But they are damp in any weather and still impossible to disinfect or even clean (even with epoxy paints), as their porous nature allows material to work its way into the surface. All metal houses are easy to disinfect and clean, but can be very cold in the winter. Solid fiberglass liners are sometimes used and they are easy to clean and disinfect, but are expensive. They can also become brittle and break and crack at cold temperatures.

Two last construction points: Whether you make it with single or double wall construction, we would prefer the outer wall of the doghouse to be metal covered like the heavier material used in travel trailers. It is usually aluminum bonded to wood. It is nontoxic, easy to clean, will not rust, does not need painting or waterproofing, and is fairly resistant to chewing. Also, make the roof, or a large portion of it capable of being opened to facilitate cleaning. Fiberglass shingles can be used, but the metal-covered wood we recommend for the walls is definitely the best. It is strong, waterproof, and easy to work with.

How do I get in?

What about the opening for the door? Do not make the doghouse door any larger than necessary to further cut down on draft problems. As a rough guideline, a 70-pound dog should have an opening about 12" wide by 14" high. In really hot areas, you might want it larger to increase ventilation. Also have the bottom of the opening 4" to 8" higher than the floor to help keep bedding and newborn puppies inside. Finally, put the door on the side of the house opposite the direction of the prevailing winter winds.

This bed is just right

Bedding? We will surprise you by saying we hate to see our clients use straw, marsh hay, or wood shavings as bedding material. Several times we have seen the first two provide an entire kennel with a case of [sarcoptic mange](#), not to mention fleas and ticks. Hay comes from farms, and if they have livestock, you can bring their problems to your door. Any of the three are impossible to disinfect and become tracked into a kennel, helping to clog drains and gutters. If you think bedding is needed, we would rather see you use old blankets or pads that can be washed. Some dogs use them for toys or drag them out of the house, but if it is comfort they want, they will learn.

Now, where to put it?

Use common sense for summer and hot weather climates. Place the doghouse in the shade. Even in our Northern area, we have seen houses with inside temperatures of over 100 degrees simply because they were exposed to direct sunlight. That is the same as a car with the windows rolled up and left in a parking lot. For the same reason, we usually prefer white or light colored outer surfaces. Again, remember to place the side of the house with the door opposite the direction of the prevailing winter winds.

In conclusion, we certainly understand that there are many correct ways to build a doghouse. Our methods and designs are only aimed at providing the most disease resistant, comfortable environment. One last point is make the roof flat, as your pet will probably spend more time on top of the doghouse than in it. They know more about proper ventilation than we do; dogs are like that.