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## Car tips and tricks for when your life is going to the dogs

With an estimated 5.5 million dogs in Canada, many pet owners are making sure their automotive choices are Fido-friendly. Gone are the days when the dog stayed at home; they're now seasoned

travellers, and vehicles with pet-appropriate features will help keep both canine and human occupants comfortable and safe.

Surprisingly, while many automakers are adding convenience and safety features for children to their vehicles, very few are concentrating specifically on pets at the retail level. Most vehicles with dedicated dog facilities progressed no further than as concepts, although these styling exercises

were brilliantly designed with dogs in mind.

The Honda W.O.W – for “Wonderful Open-hearted Wagon” – debuted at the 2005 Tokyo Motor Show and was designed specifically for pet owners. It included a small dog kennel in the dash, seats that could be turned into larger pet crates, a walk-through water bowls and an easy-clean floor.

Nissan also took four-legged friends into account with the Bevel Concept, shown at the Detroit Auto Show in 2007; while its primary focus was handymen who would use its features as extensions of their workshops, the Bevel also included a 360-degree pet leash swivel connection and a removable “doggie hutch” pet carrier that snapped securely into the cargo area.

Until automobiles like these come to market – if ever – pet

owners are best served by vehicles designed to be easy-clean and simple to access.

The Honda Element, among the best overall for dog owners, includes full-length vinyl flooring, waterproof upholstery, fold-up and removable rear seats, a low floor and an available sunroof over the cargo area. That's primarily because it was designed for outdoor activities, but it works out perfectly for dog owners as well.

Pet-friendly accessories are also important, such as the dog guards Subaru sells for its Forester, Legacy, Outback and Tribeca models. The company takes people and pets into consideration, offering guards that also fit vehicles with sunroofs.

“A moonroof shouldn't be a limitation when transporting your pet,” says Ted Lalka, Subaru's vice-president of Product Planning, and owner of a Portuguese Water Dog. “It's a popular option and people want that accessory, but they also want to keep their pets safe. The guard also doesn't impede rearward visibility. The dog can look forward and see people. They're pack animals and they want to be with people.”

### Looking for a dog-friendly vehicle:

- ✘ Easy clean-up is a primary consideration. Look for stain-resistant fabrics, plastic-covered cargo areas or rubber mats.

- ✘ Low floors and easy access will become more important as your pet ages and finds it difficult to jump into an SUV.

- ✘ Your dog should always be secured with a pet harness that buckles into the seatbelt, or in a crate or behind a pet barrier. A front-seat lap dog will be killed if the airbag deploys in a collision. Dogs should never ride unsecured in top-down convertibles or pickup truck beds.

- ✘ Not all aftermarket pet barriers work if you have a sunroof. Be sure your dog guard is compatible with your vehicle.

- ✘ Cats need love, too. Make sure there's enough room for a cat carrier, either on the floor or properly secured with a seatbelt, so a sudden stop won't send it tumbling from the seat.

By Jil McIntosh | Cars & Lifestyle