

It's perfectly OK to utilize treats in your training, even with adult dogs. Treats are used extensively in Operant Conditioning. Dogs are generally very food-motivated, making treating an extremely effective training tool. Not using food to our advantage in training would be ridiculous. Training treats should be soft, so they can be eaten quickly, and must be truly great smelling and tasting to the dog. They need to be small (raisin-sized), so you can give them many, many treats without overloading on calories. I know it seems ridiculous given the many all-meat expensive treats I've purchased for this purpose, but my dogs' favorite training treats are Canine Carry Outs. You can usually buy these at Walmart. Whenever I train puppies with live birds, I make sure I have a couple of hot dogs in my pocket to avoid a game of keep-away. (The treat has to be better than the bird, or she'll opt for the bird.) Because your training reward must be something extremely valuable to your dog, it won't be petting. We pet our dogs all the time for doing absolutely nothing. At best, petting is a reinforcer for something they've already been trained to do. Most dogs love having their belly rubbed, which could be a reward, if you don't rub their belly outside of training. Some dogs are crazy for a particular toy or having a special ball thrown for them. These should be toys or balls you use only during training. Some dogs love to kiss your face. Be creative with your non-food rewards, keeping in mind the reward has to be really great - from the dog's point of view.

If someone tells you it's wrong to use treats when training a hunting dog, politely don't listen. Food is by far the best canine motivator. It's the #1 most important thing in a dog's life and, for most dogs, a piece of meat is irresistible. Not using this to your advantage in training would be ridiculous.

There is a very widespread idea that once a command has been trained, you should not treat every time your dog properly performs. This is called "variable enforcement" or "intermittent reinforcement" and is the same type of reinforcement humans get when they play slot machines. The original research behind this idea came from laboratory studies using rats and pigeons. Every correct response was rewarded during the learning phase, then once the rat knew the behavior, the reward was put on a variable reinforcement schedule. The research found the rat's behavior grew stronger when it wasn't rewarded every time. Before long, these research findings filtered down to the dog training community. Problem is, dogs are far more intelligent than rats and a laboratory isn't real life. Dogs aren't trained in white boxes containing nothing but a lever to press and nothing to do but to play our training game. Your dog's world is full of lots of reinforcers competing for your dog's attention and these reinforcers are available at a much higher rate of reinforcement than your own. Every time your dog sniffs something interesting, it is reinforcing. Not the second sniff nor the fourth sniff, but every single one. Actual research shows, that in situations where there are competing reinforcements available, the highest rate of reinforcement will "win." In simple language: if you want your training to work as well and quickly as possible, you need to reward for every single correct behavior with something your dog finds extremely reinforcing.

Do you eventually need to reduce your rewards during training? No, you should remain consistent and generous with your rewards during all phases of training, including brush-ups. For our dogs, we don't even need to think about reducing reinforcers, because reinforcers are built into the work itself: hunting is reinforcing, finding game is reinforcing, running is reinforcing, chasing is reinforcing, pointing is reinforcing, picking up game is reinforcing, retrieving game is reinforcing, scenting is reinforcing, tracking is reinforcing... We have bred our hunting dogs to find all the facets of their job to be extremely reinforcing. So we only need to use other reinforcers heavily (like food rewards) during the beginning and intermediate stages of hunting training. Once our dog learns his job, the job itself will contain

all the reinforcers needed to keep him performing.

You should never give your dog a treat for free. Your dog should always do something for you first. The easiest command to teach a dog is Sit. Since dogs are masters of reading body language, I recommend you teach your dog a hand signal for Sit. It should not take long and your puppy will automatically sit, without command, any time you are offering a treat.

Generally-speaking, training with treats is something you'll do a lot when your dog is young, because she isn't mature enough to use pressure (nice word for negative reinforcement or compulsion). Eventually, there will be many ways to reward your puppy. So don't worry, you won't need to carry treats when you're hunting! In fact, I've found my dogs won't take a treat when we're hunting. There have been times when I've tried to give them something for a pick-me-up during hunting and they just stick their nose up at it, or drop it on the ground and continue hunting. This is because, to them, hunting IS the reward.