

It's A Dog's World™

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DIGGING

You've come home from a long day at work and greeting you at the back door is a furry little face caked in dirt and mud. You gaze out over your once pristine yard and are met with something that looks like the surface of the moon filled with craters. Sound familiar?

Digging is as natural to dogs as wagging their tails. Like many other canine behaviors that we consider annoying and destructive, dogs are just doing what comes naturally! The trick to eliminating unwanted digging behavior is in understanding why dogs dig.



- **Breed** - Did you know that some dog breeds were developed to actually encourage digging behavior? Breeds that fall under the Terrier Group were originally bred by farmers to “go to ground” in search of burrowing rodents like weasels, gophers, moles, rabbits and badgers. Just because we don't use them for that purpose anymore doesn't mean their natural instinct has disappeared. Other breeds that were bred to dig are Dachshunds and Huskies.
- **Boredom & Lack of Exercise** - Dogs left alone in the yard for long periods of time without mental stimulation may resort to digging because it's fun and it gives them something to do. It also helps eliminate excess energy. Imagine how you would cope if you were left alone in an empty room for hours at a time?
- **Chilling Out** – Many dogs may dig shallow pits to lay in on hot days. The cooler, damp earth helps them cope when the weather is uncomfortably warm.
- **Separation Anxiety & Socialization** – Dogs that suffer from Separation Anxiety may dig under fences and gates to escape the yard and find their owners. Once they get out, dogs with separation anxiety typically do not leave their property, but run to the front door to wait for their owners. Conversely, extremely friendly and sociable dogs may dig under the fence to play with the neighbor's dog or to chase the kids walking down the street.



Once you've identified the possible reasons why your dog is digging, it's time to implement some management tools to reduce or eliminate this unwanted behavior. Most of these corrective methods involve passive interrupters to discourage your dog from digging. Passive interrupters don't require you to be present to implement a correction, which is good, because your dog is smart enough not to dig when you are watching. Be advised that you may need to try a variety of methods to be successful.

Assuming that you are meeting your dog's exercise needs (a tired dog is a well-behaved dog) and you've given your dog a variety of interactive and fun toys to keep them busy (see our handout on Enrichment Toys) but the digging hasn't diminished, then it's time to implement other management methods.

Booby Traps – Booby trapping an area involves putting something in or near the previously dug holes to discourage your dog from coming back.

- **The Nose Knows** – Putting something with an unpleasant scent in or around the area where your dog is digging may keep them from returning to the scene of the crime. You can try putting some of your dog's droppings (aka "poop") in the hole and lightly covering it with dirt. Another method involves sprinkling cayenne pepper in the hole. There are also commercial products available in the Garden section of your local home improvement store that you can sprinkle on the ground every couple of days to deter your dog from coming into the area.
- **Make Digging Uncomfortable** – This method works best in large areas like planter beds and along fence lines. It simply involves rolling out a length of chicken wire or "hardware cloth" in or along the area your pet is digging up. You will need to anchor the wire down in the ground using a combination of landscape pins and, possibly, large, decorative rocks. If you are using this in a planter bed, you can cut openings in the wire for your plants. If you wish, you can also lightly cover the wire with dirt or mulch to make it more visually appealing. When your dog tries digging in the bed or along the fence line, his nails will make contact with the wire, which won't feel very good. A few tries and your dog will usually give up his attempts.
- **Install Barriers** – Barriers prevent your dog from gaining access to certain areas of your yard. In some cases, you may want to create a comfortable dog run for your pet by gating off a side yard. This can also be done by purchasing a large wire kennel. Be sure to provide plenty of shade and water for your dog if you are going to confine them to a particular area.



You may also try teaching your dog to stay out of certain areas of your yard through the use of above ground “correctors”. Typically these are devices that will set off an audible alarm, shoot off a high-powered jet of water, like the Scarecrow®, or provide an electrical shock when your dog enters the forbidden area.



Scarecrow®

The latter deterrent is done with above or below ground electronic fencing. In some cases the fencing can be as simple as an above ground wire that “zaps” your dog if he comes into physical contact. Unfortunately, this type of fencing can also shock anyone else that touches it, including you and your family. A far better type of fencing involves system of below-ground wires and a special collar that your dog wears when he or she is out in the yard. These types of fences will give your dog an audible warning as they approach the forbidden zone. If your dog ignores the tone and continues into the area, they will receive an electrical shock from the collar. Because every dog reacts differently to this type of correction, it is strongly recommended that you seek a fencing company that works with you and your pet to humanely teach the dog how to respect the barrier.

“If You Can’t Beat Them....” – If you have tried a variety of the previously mentioned techniques and your dog is still bound and determined to dig, then you may want to consider creating a Digging Box or designate a space where it is okay for your dog to do his excavating. Digging Boxes can be as easy as using a child’s plastic sandbox, or as elaborate and visually appealing as you like. Simply fill the box with sand, potting mix or soil and bury a few exciting toys or treats in it. If you see your dog heading into forbidden territory to dig, verbally correct him and take him to the box. Encourage him by digging a little bit in the soil with your hands or a trowel. When your dog shows interest in digging in the box, be sure to give lots of praise!

