

To Dig or Not to Dig...

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Mad City Dog Training

Dogs like to dig. Some dogs dig at blankets or bedding. Some lucky dogs like to dig at the beach. Most dogs that dig, though, dig in the yard at home. Unfortunately yards are where humans like to dig, too. We sow our gardens, perfect our lawns, and plant trees for shade and beauty. Often what dogs and humans see as necessary digging is not the same thing!



Dogs dig for a variety of reasons. They may dig out of boredom, to hide what they consider valuable resources, to find a cool place to nap on damp earth, or to dig up prey and other valuable things. Some breeds are predisposed to digging – terriers and northern breeds like huskies and malamutes come to mind. These breeds survived as long as they have *because* they dig, either to hunt or to find a warm place in cold climates. Even if your dog does not have an ancestral reason for digging, it still can be a problem.

There is a multitude of old fashioned ways to prevent a dog from digging. Most of these old fashioned methods are so harsh they border on animal cruelty so I will not mention them. However, one old method that has been tried with mixed results is to bury the dog's feces in holes that he has dug. The idea is that the dog will dig down where he has dug before and find an unpleasant surprise, which then causes him to stop digging. This may be enough of a deterrent for some dogs, and since you will probably have both holes to fill and dog feces to bury, it may be a method worth trying.

My preferred method for dealing with digging, however, is to provide an acceptable place for the dog to dig. An unused child's sandbox, a sand or dirt pile, or an out of the way patch of can be used for this purpose. Whenever you see your dog digging in an inappropriate place, walk over, verbally correct the dog with a "no!" or "wrong!", and lead him over to the digging pit. Encourage digging and then praise the dog when he gets started. Burying favorite toys, treats, and bones in the "digging place" will encourage excavation activity to stay in one place. Dogs who like to hide their valuable items can also be encouraged to hide them in the digging area.

In order to redirect digging it is important to supervise the dog whenever he is outside. This way you can correct and redirect his behavior every single time. Supervising the dog will also make sure that he is not getting bored and finding ways to amuse himself by moving dirt around.

If a dog digs because he wants to find a cool spot, it is important to make sure that the dog has adequate and acceptable ways to keep himself cool in warm weather. Make water available to the dog at all times, ensure that there is enough shade for the entire day, and consider providing a wading pool refilled daily. Remember that dogs can over heat much more quickly than humans because they cannot sweat as humans do. They mainly release heat from their mouths and through the pads of their feet. Ultimately in hot weather the best place for your dog is wherever you are able to find relief from the heat.



A few people have found training their dogs to dig on command useful. While the dog is digging, give it an enthusiastic command such as “dig” and praise it. (It helps to have a digging place already established to do this!) When you are able to point to a place and say “dig” and the dog does it, then you are ready to put your pooch to work. A German shepherd breeder trained one of her dogs to dig holes in her garden every year while she followed along behind him planting flowers. You do run the risk of having a dog who is so thrilled with helping that he will dig holes everywhere for you to plant things in, but if you are able to manage the behavior, it is a nice way for both you and the dog to do what you wish.



There are two types of digging that are incredibly difficult to redirect or train out of a dog. This is digging to escape from fences and digging to find buried animals. In these cases management is key.

If your dog constantly digs under the fence to escape, for safety's sake you will want to do whatever is necessary to prevent the dog from doing this. Some people have found success with altering the fence by placing bricks, stones, or paving blocks at the base where the dog likes to dig. Other people have buried chicken wire to prevent the dog from being able to get past a certain area. Placing a cement border at the base of a fence and installing electronic fencing along the perimeter of the fence are two other ways to reduce or eliminate digging at the fence line.

Training prey drive out of a dog is almost impossible. It is far more effective to work with a dog's drives than against them. Find ways for your dog to dig safely and supervise your dog so that he does not get reinforced for digging in areas where he should not. Activities such as earth dog trials, fetch, lure coursing, flyball, and even agility can allow a dog to exhibit his prey drive in acceptable ways. When the dog has an approved outlet for his prey drive, he will be less likely to find his own activities.