

Integrative Veterinary Care

Digging

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There is no point in trying to keep a dog from digging. Digging is hardwired into dog's brains, as a survival skill. Digging is part of creating a den space, making a nest or bed, and hunting. Digging is fun and it's good exercise, too. So what can you do? You can control it by redirecting the excavations to an appropriate, designated part of the yard.

Start with a kiddie wading pool. Fill it halfway with sand and put it in an area where a little spilled sand won't be a problem for you. I recommend using sand because it's heavy, it really takes work to dig in, and it's a different texture than the important parts of most of our yards (the flower beds, the lawn, etc). It also smells different than topsoil or potting soil. Buy a number of Kong toys, and anything else your dog thinks is really cool, that you don't mind burying. Stuff the Kongs with biscuits and/or beef liver, and let your dog see you bury them in the sand. Bury them at different levels, with the first ones partly or mostly exposed (at least at first). Letting your dog see you dig in the sand will encourage your dog to think that's a cool place to dig – after all, the “big dog” likes to dig there, and the “big dog” is burying all sorts of valuable stuff in there! Using food stuffed Kongs and other prized toys or durable treats makes the pool a rewarding place to dig.

Now we have to deter digging in the rest of the yard. If your dog favors the flower beds, break down and put up a wire fence. After six months or so, you should be able to take the fence down as long as you don't use any really exciting, smelly organic fertilizers. When you first remove the fence, you will want to be able to spy on your dog continuously while he is out in the yard for the first few weeks he has access to the fenced area. Any digging that occurs (or any interest in that area at all) should be deterred in a sudden, startling fashion. Air horns, shake cans (thrown near the dog), or blasts with a high-pressure water gun are all things that can be used to startle your dog away from the area of interest. If your dog has been digging in the grass or along the fence, fill in the hole and place a poop on top of the hole. Dogs tend to be fastidious and don't like to step (or dig) in their own excrement. If your dog continues to revisit the scenes of previous crimes, you can bury chicken wire in the hole. Use tent stakes to keep the wire in place. The wire prevents digging from being very rewarding by limiting the depth of the hole and by causing some discomfort as the dog digs.

For the most part, cats will stay out of the digging pit as long as the dog is outside. You may wish to cover the pit at night when your dog comes inside with you, and when you and your dog go on trips. (Of course, a little cat poop might make the pit a more rewarding place to dig!)

Some trainers advocate just designating a part of the yard for digging and burying cool stuff there. I feel that the wading pool provides an area with a very distinct boundary, decreasing the dog's likelihood of “messing up” by digging in the wrong place. Using sand instead of dirt or soil makes the digging pit even more different from the rest of the yard and decreases the likelihood of your dog deciding to dig up the lawn or flower beds at a friend or relative's house while travelling.

Increasing your dog's constructive exercise (via walks, playing fetch, etc.) will usually also help decrease recreational digging.

Non-recreational Digging

Dogs will sometimes dig to provide a cool bed to lie in. Dogs doing this generally dig in a soft, cool area of the yard, sometimes where the ground remains moist -- usually in the lawn. If your dog is digging to make a bed, the only way to stop him is to provide an alternative, acceptable place to lie down. There are several gel-foam type beds now available, advertised in dog magazines and on the Internet. Placing one on the porch or in the dog house may help deter your dog from digging beds in the yard. You can also put a poop in the dog's self-made bed to help get your point across!

Some dogs dig in an attempt to escape the yard. In this case, the digging usually occurs at the fence or near exits (gates or doors). This may be an expression of fear, boredom, or desire to get to something on the other side of the fence. Burying chicken wire along the bottom of the fence (you may need to attach the wire to the lower edge of the fence) will help prevent escape. You will also need to find ways to make being in the yard a rewarding experience, by providing a digging pit, hiding stuffed Kongs, and providing other special outdoor-only toys. You may need to start training your dog to spend time outside alone the same way you can teach him to spend time in a crate, by gradually increasing the time he spends there (starting from 30 seconds), feeding him in the yard, etc. (Refer to the crate training handout for an outline.) Increasing your dog's constructive exercise will generally also help with this type of digging. In some cases, the solution may simply be to install a doggie door into the garage or house.