

# Digging

"I dig because I can." It's the motto of dogs everywhere, and completely normal behavior. Yet the reasons behind the activity are varied. Your dog may dig to seek entertainment, attention, comfort, escape, prey, or protection. (Despite how you might feel sometimes, your dog *won't* dig out of spite, revenge, or a desire to destroy your yard.) And just when you think you've outsmarted the old pooch by finding ways to make the area where he digs unappealing, your dog will likely begin digging in other locations or display other unacceptable behavior, such as chewing or barking. A much more effective approach to the problem is to address the *cause* of the digging. Here's advice on how to figure out *why* your dog digs—and how to stop it:

## Seeking Entertainment

Dogs may dig as a form of self-play when they learn that roots and soil "play back." Your dog may be digging for entertainment if:

- He's left alone in the yard for long periods of time without opportunities for interaction with you or others.
- His environment is relatively barren—with no playmates or toys.
- He's a puppy or adolescent (under three years old) and doesn't have other outlets for his energy.
- He's the type of dog that is bred to dig as part of his "job" (such as a terrier).
- He's a particularly active type of dog who needs an active job to be happy (such as a herding or sporting breed).
- He's recently seen you "playing" in the dirt (gardening or working in the yard).

## Recommendations

We recommend expanding your dog's world and increasing his "people time" in the following ways:

- Walk your dog at least twice daily. It's good exercise for both of you—mentally and physically!
- Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee®, and play with him as often as possible.
- Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks. Practice these commands/tricks every day for five to ten minutes.
- Take a training class with your dog and practice daily what you've learned.
- Keep interesting toys in the yard to keep your dog busy even when you're not around. Kong®-type toys filled with treats or busy-box dog toys work especially well. Rotate the toys to make them seem new and interesting.
- For dedicated diggers, provide an "acceptable digging area." Choose an area of the yard where it's okay for your dog to dig, and cover that area with loose soil or sand. If you catch your dog digging in an unacceptable area, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise and say, "No dig." Then immediately take the dog to his designated digging area. When he digs in the approved spot, reward him with praise. Make the unacceptable digging spots unattractive (at least temporarily) by setting rocks or chicken wire into the dirt. Make the acceptable area attractive by burying safe items for him to discover.



## Seeking Comfort or Protection

In hot weather, dogs may dig holes to lie in the cool dirt. They may also dig to provide themselves with shelter from cold, wind, or rain, or to try to find water. Your dog may be digging for comfort or protection if:

- The holes are near foundations of buildings, large shade trees, or a water source.
- Your dog doesn't have a shelter or his shelter is exposed to the hot sun or cold winds.
- You find evidence that your dog is lying in the holes he digs.

## Recommendations

We recommend that you provide your dog with the comfort or protection he seeks:

- Provide an insulated doghouse. Make sure it affords protection from wind and sun.
- Your dog may still prefer a hole in the ground, in which case you can try providing an "approved digging area" as described above. Make sure the allowed digging area is in a spot that is protected from the elements.
- Provide plenty of fresh water in a bowl that can't be tipped over.

## Seeking Attention

Any behavior can become attention-getting behavior if the dog learns that he receives attention for engaging in it. (Even punishment is a form of attention.) Your dog may be digging to get attention if:

- He digs in your presence.
- His other opportunities for interaction with you are limited.

## Recommendations

We recommend that you ignore the behavior:

- Don't give your dog attention for digging. Remember, even punishment is attention.
- Make sure your dog has sufficient time with you on a daily basis. That way, he doesn't have to resort to "misbehaving" to get your attention.
- Make his favorite "off-limits" chew objects unattractive or unavailable to him. Use aversives on objects that cannot be put away.

