



# DOG TRAINING SOLUTIONS

## Digging

There are two extremes of opinion when it comes to dogs and their digging habits: one, that a dog is a dog, and we should permit him to express his true canine nature by allowing him free reign over the yard and flowerbeds; and two, that a flowerbed is a flowerbed, and no dog should even think about expression his dogginess if such an expression comes at the price of a season's worth of rosebuds.

My own viewpoint tends to favour the middle ground. Although plenty of dogs do love to dig, and it's healthy for them to be permitted to indulge in this habit from time to time, there's a difference between permitting your dog to express his inner puppy, and allowing him to run rampant in the yard. I don't see why a dog should have to come at the price of a garden, and vice versa: flowers and dogs can coexist peacefully. If your dog's developed a taste for digging, it'll just take a bit of time (and some crafty ingenuity) on your part to resolve the issue satisfactorily.

First of all, if you have yet to adopt a dog and your concern for the fate of your flowerbeds is purely hypothetical, consider the breed of dog that you'd like. If you've got your eye on a specific mixed-breed dog, what seems to be the most prominent?

The reason that I ask is simply because breed often plays a significant role in any given dog's personal valuation of digging as a rewarding pastime – terriers and Nordic breeds in particular (Huskies, Malamutes, some members of the Spitz family) seem to particularly enjoy digging.

Of course, when you get right down to the sum and substance, each dog is first and foremost an individual, and there's no guaranteed way to predict whether or not your chosen familial addition is going to be a burrower or not. But if you're trying to reduce the likelihood of an involuntarily landscaped garden as much as possible, I suggest you stay away from all breeds of terrier (the name means "go to earth", after all!) and the Nordic breeds.

### ***WHY DO DOGS DIG?***

In no particular order, here are some of the more common reasons that a dog will dig:

- Lack of exercise. Digging is a good way for a hyped-up, under-exercised dog to burn off some of that nervous energy.
- Boredom. Bored dogs need a "job" to do, something rewarding and interesting, to help the time pass by.
- Digging is often the ideal solution for a bored dog: it gives him a sense of purpose, and distracts him from an otherwise-empty day.
- The need for broader horizons. Some dogs are just escape artists by nature – no matter how much exercise and attention they get, it's nearly impossible to confine them. For a four-legged Houdini, it's not the digging in itself that's the reward, it's the glorious unknown that exists beyond the fence line.

- Separation anxiety. To a dog that's seriously pining for your company, digging under those confining walls represents the most direct path to you. Separation anxiety is an unpleasant psychological issue relatively common among dogs – but because it's so complex, we won't be dealing with it in this newsletter. Instead, you can find excellent resources for both preventing and coping with the condition at <http://www.kingdomofpets.com/dogobediencetraining/>

### ***CURBING THE HABIT***

Many of the reasons contributing to your dog's desire to dig suggest their own solutions: if your dog's not getting enough exercise (generally speaking, at least forty-five minutes' worth of vigorous walking per day), take him for more walks. If he's bored, give him some toys and chews to play with during your absence, and wear him out before you leave so he spends most of the day snoozing. An escape-artist dog might need to be crated, or at least kept inside the house where he's less likely to be able to break free.

For those dogs who just like to dig as a pastime in itself, though, here are a few basic tips for controlling inappropriate digging as much as is reasonably possible:

- Restrict your dog's access. This is the most effective thing you can do: if he's never in the yard without active supervision, there's no opportunity for digging.
- Use natural deterrent. 99.9% of dogs will shy back, horrified, from the prospect of digging anywhere that there's dog poop. Even the ones who like to eat poop (a condition known as coprophagia) generally won't dig anywhere near it – it offends their basic, fastidious dislike of soiling their coat and paws.
- Use nature's own wiles. If the digging is bothering you because it's upsetting the more delicate blooms in your garden, plant hardier blossoms: preferably, those with deep roots and thorny defences. Roses are ideal.
- A more time-consuming, but super-effective way of handling the issue: roll up the first inch or two of turf in your yard, and lay down chicken wire underneath it. Your dog won't know it's there until he's had a few tries at digging, but once he's convinced himself that it's pointless (which won't take long), he'll never dig in that yard again.

### ***ACCEPT YOUR DOG'S NEED FOR AN OUTLET: GIVE HIM A PLACE TO DIG***

If your dog is set on tunnelling your yard into a grassless, crater-studded lunar landscape, but you're equally determined to prevent this from happening at all costs, please take a moment to consider before embarking on a gruelling and time-consuming preventative strategy.

Setting yourself the goal of eradicating all digging behaviour, period, is pretty unrealistic: it's not fair on you (since, really, you're setting yourself up for failure), and it's not really fair on your poor dog either – if he's a true-blue digger, it's just part of his personality, and he needs at least some opportunity to express that.

But a lawn and a dog don't have to be mutually exclusive: the most humane and understanding thing for you to do in this case is simply to redirect his digging energy.

You do this by allocating him an area where he's allowed to dig as much as he pleases. Once this zone's been established, you can make it crystal-clear that there's to be absolutely no digging in the rest of the yard – and you can enforce your rules with a clear conscience, since you know your dog now has his own little corner of the world to turn upside down and inside out as he chooses.

But what if you don't have a "spare corner" of the yard? What if the whole thing, grass, flowerbeds, and gravel path, is just too dear to your heart? That's OK too – invest in a sandbox, which you can place anywhere in the garden.

You can even make one yourself (the deeper, the better, obviously). Fill it with a mixture of sand and earth, and put some leaves or grass on top if you like - get your dog interested in it by having a scratch around yourself, until he gets the idea.

#### ***MAKE SURE THE BOUNDARIES ARE CLEAR***

To make it clear to him that the sandbox is OK but that everywhere else is a no-dig zone, spend a little time supervising him. When he starts to dig in the box (you can encourage this by shallowly burying a few choice marrowbones in there), praise him energetically – and if he starts digging anywhere else, correct him straight away with an "Ah-ah-aaaah!" or "No!".

Then, redirect him immediately to the sandbox, and dole out vociferous praise when digging recommences.

To really clarify the lesson, give him a treat when digging gets underway in the sandbox – the close proximity between the correction (for digging out of the sandbox) and praise/reward (for digging in the sandbox) will ensure that your point strikes home.

#### ***FURTHER READING***

For more information on recognizing and dealing with problematic behaviours like digging, chewing, barking, and aggression, check out SitStayFetch. It's a detailed how-to manual for the responsible owner, and is packed with all the information you'll need for raising a healthy, happy, well-adjusted pooch: from problem behaviours to dog psychology to obedience work, SitStayFetch has it covered.

You can check out SitStayFetch by clicking on the link below:

<http://www.kingdomofpets.com/dogobediencetraining/index.php?aff=cbdtsol608&type=digging>