

DIGGING

Digging is a natural and instinctual behavior for all dogs and certain breeds are more predisposed to the behavior. Additionally, various circumstances can bring about a digging response. Dogs instinctually dig to bury food, find food, hunt quarry, make a place to sleep or a den, expose cooler earth, make a place to have pups, navigate terrain (get from point A to point B), get to a bitch in season, access food or water, and to answer the call of the wild. In addition, dogs dig to investigate their environment and to entertain themselves when they are bored or need to release pent up energy. Because digging is instinctual, it is a “self-reinforcing” behavior. Consequently, dogs may dig when stressed because they will often revert to an instinctual and self-reinforcing behavior to offset stress and anxiety. Think of it as retreating to a “safe place”, which means doing what comes naturally, to avoid or reduce stress and anxiety.

To understand the truly innate and instinctual nature of the digging behavior, you need only to watch your own couch potato. Even a dog who does not dig in the yard will dig to create a comfortable place to “bed down” such as the floor, carpet, chair, couch, or bed. The dog does this until their place is just right and then they lay down to rest or sleep. The dog digs, turns in a circle, digs some more, turns again, and eventually lies down. Dogs do this even after they have been lying in a particular place for some time or are in a place where they always lay. This is pure instinct and part of what it means to be a dog. *(NOTE: Often when a dog has torn up a couch or chair cushion, this occurred because initially they were instinctually digging to make a comfortable place to lie down. When they inadvertently exposed a small break in the upholstery, then the exposed material became something to investigate and explore which they pursued with their paws and mouths. This same thing can occur with carpeting.)*

Almost all puppies will exhibit some digging in the yard. As young pups, they are initially just investigating their environment. The pups may see a blade of grass move, notice a bug moving in the grass, or smell something in the ground. The most natural way for any pup/dog to investigate and explore anything is with their paws and mouths. Then, once they dig just a bit, they expose many more smells that are intriguing and need further investigation. Once the pup/dog starts digging, their instincts kick in and they dig with more focus and tenacity. The more they dig, the more instinctually gratifying the activity becomes. The behavior feeds on itself, which is why the dog starts out pawing and digging gingerly and then their digging becomes more fervent and rapid.

Adult dogs who have previously (or since puppyhood) not been a digger, may suddenly start to dig. This can be from boredom, something great on the other side of the fence, or a bitch in season somewhere in the neighborhood (even if your dog is neutered). Dogs can be motivated to dig by many other factors. If your yard has earthworms or grub worms, these are food sources. Actually, most insects qualify as food sources. Nuts buried by squirrels are especially attractive. When grass and other vegetation first begin to come out of their dormant phase, the underground roots are very fragrant and/or palatable. There can be mole or gopher tunnels underground. To be honest, any underground smell may intrigue your dog, connect with their sense of food, or trigger their critter response. If cats have access to your yard, this can elicit digging because cats

usually bury their poop. Cat food is very rich which makes their output extremely fragrant and palatable to the dogs.

Certain types of earth (soil) can attract and entice a dog to dig. Fresh earth, moist earth, some mulches, topsoil, soft dirt, and sand are all very enticing to dogs. So, be prepared! Be particularly careful about using anything that contains any type of manure. I can assure you this will cause most dogs to dig. When you plant a flowerbed, turn the soil, bring in sand, dirt, mulches, topsoil, grass sod, or any substances of this nature, you should keep these areas fenced or blocked off for a time! When keeping certain areas moist, you may need to block these areas because moist ground is very fragrant. Moisture infuses all the ground smells and your dog can be drawn to those areas.

When you do not take these precautions, you set up your dog for a digging situation. Even a dog who has previously not been a digger, when something draws them to dig and they experience (connect with) the instinctual and self-gratifying aspects of digging, you have allowed a behavior to surface that had not previously been an issue. A dog can excavate a large area faster than you can say NO DIG! An interesting aspect to the dogs' digging is that when you try to fill the hole with the dug dirt...there is NEVER enough to fill the hole. A good 1/4 to 1/3 of the dirt will have mysteriously disappeared. Actually, their digging has thrown the dirt and dispersed much of it over a large area that is not part of the mound.

A NOTE ABOUT TERRIERS:

Terriers are "earth" (terra) dogs and have been bred for hundreds of years to "go to ground". Digging is the most basic and instinctual part of their nature. Terriers' nails grow faster than other breeds because in a natural setting their frequent digging would rapidly "wear down" their nails. Rapid nail growth is nature's way of keeping the terriers "in the nails" needed for digging.

Consequently, in our domesticated and "non digging" environments, terrier nails need to be trimmed more frequently than other breeds. If you do not trim their nails frequently and regularly, they will get entirely TOO LONG very quickly. I recommend trimming every two to four weeks.

There are several methods for teaching dogs to NO DIG and you may need to use a combination of approaches. My Shake Can method (E-Book Chapter 26) is very effective when used properly and consistently. There are commercial products you can spray or sprinkle over an area as an effective deterrent to digging in many situations. The commercial products that I have found to be effective are Repel, Boundary, and even Bitter Apple. You can also use Cayenne Pepper. You will frequently need to re-apply (refresh) any of these items because they gradually lose the potency of the "unpleasant" smell and/or taste that acts as the deterrent to the dogs.

As with any behavior modification, you need to address the digging behavior AS it occurs, rather than after the fact. This means preventing access to possible digging situations except when you can observe and react to their behaviors. Initially, this process will be time consuming and inconvenient, but it will pay huge dividends in the long-run. Realize that you can pay now (time and effort) for a relatively short amount of time OR you can pay later. The “pay later” scenario means your dog pays an ongoing price because they repeatedly displease you and/or damage your yard by merely doing what their nature and instincts dictate! You will pay an ongoing price in continued stress, anxiety, and irritation, not to mention the financial and physical cost to repair damage to your yard.

The very first order of business with any digging issue is to fully recognize and “accept” that digging is part of what dogs do because they are dogs. They cannot conceptualize that they have done something incorrect or unacceptable when they do what nature and their species dictate. Therefore, even when you display extreme displeasure to your dog’s digging behavior, they will not fully grasp what it is that they did that so displeased you. Your dog will know you are displeased, but they will NOT understand “why”, because this equation does not compute in dog speak. Consequently, you must rely on “behavior modification” and pattern training which require that you deal with the behavior, AS it occurs...not after the fact.

Let me share how I managed with my last several dogs, which included a Chow/Keeshond mix, Golden Retriever, GSD, and FOUR terriers! All of these dogs were young pups when I brought them home. The Chow/Keeshond mix was the oldest at 5 months of age. I made sure to keep a close eye on my pups anytime they were in the yard, their potty pen, or yard playpen. This was so I could react when the pup first started to use their paws to examine something on the ground. Pups need to be closely supervised in the yard for quite sometime. This level of supervision is needed for many safety reasons, not just digging situations. My supervision included times when I was in the yard with the pup AND times when I was in the house watching from a window or the sliding glass door.

Pups/dogs are very intelligent and often learn that certain behaviors are not acceptable when you are nearby, but this does not compute when you are not around. The reason is when we are nearby, we are more “consistent” in preventing or correcting (reacting) to behaviors. The result is the pups/dogs become “patterned” to associate those modified behaviors with our presence. However, when we are not nearby, the pups/dogs can engage in an instinctual and self-reinforcing behavior. Consequently, your pup/dog may only engage in a behavior when you are not around or nearby, because they are successfully patterned that “X” behavior is not acceptable...when you are around! This patterned behavior does not correlate to the very different scenario created when you are NOT around. [NOTE: An unfortunate misconception is that dogs engage in certain behaviors ONLY when they are out of our sight because they KNOW it is wrong. This is utterly false, as I have explained.]

Digging is part of being a dog and the only way the dogs can alter or modify an instinctual behavior is through “pattern training”. When the pattern training is specific to a particular scenario, it does not apply to other scenarios. This is why it is important to be very consistent in your pattern training and for all applicable scenarios. This allows you to pattern train the actual behavior as opposed to only a specific scenario. Instinct driven behaviors prevent any modification of those behaviors from carrying over to other (ostensibly unrelated) circumstances and situations. Instincts always trump human rules; especially when the human rules are in direct conflict with species dictated behaviors. It is up to you to ensure your pattern training bridges this instinct gap.

Therefore, you must help your dog make this connection across the board. Even when you have successfully modified your dog’s digging behavior, you must be cognizant of circumstances and situations that can be instinctual catalysts. You cannot ever feel that you are home free when talking about an instinctual behavior. Keep in mind the examples I provided regarding things that can trigger an instinctual digging response. When you do not take appropriate measures to train your dog and/or do not take precautions to prevent your dog from being drawn to dig even after they are trained, or your dog has never shown a propensity to dig; the results are your fault, not your dog’s fault.

Always be aware of circumstances that may trigger a digging response in your dog. It is OUR responsibility to ensure our dogs are successful at what we need from them. This is especially true when what we ask is contradictory to their basic nature.

Let me share a couple of personal examples. Years ago, I brought in some sandy loam to level out areas of my back yard. I knew my dogs, who are trained not to dig, would likely be drawn to these areas because of the sandy loam and the grass sod. In addition, the daily watering would make these areas even more enticing. I bought a roll of galvanized wire to encircle these areas while the grass grew in. Not taking this precaution would have set my dogs up to fail. Moreover, I did not want them to have the chance to reinforce and reconnect with their digging instincts.

A prolific pecan crop poses another challenge. I keep as many picked up as possible because the dogs love to eat them. Pecans are nuts and high in fat, which is not healthy for the dogs and adds weight quickly. Another given is squirrels bury the pecans for winter. The result is my dogs dig up the buried pecans. To them, this is not “digging”; it is merely accessing a food source. Also in the spring, when the ground insects and earthworms become active and grass roots underground become very fragrant and enticing, I make certain to have my deterrent products handy.

My point is that even when the dogs are trained not to dig for the sake of digging, there will still be situations and circumstances that will be an instinctually high- ticket draw. In these instances, the dogs are not truly “digging”; they are merely accessing enticing and intriguing items underground. When my dogs access something underground, they do NOT dig a large area or as we commonly say *dig to China*. There are just small exposed earth areas (divots). There is no way to 100% prevent these situations unless you keep

your dog out of the yard or only allow them yard access when you are with them or have a dog pen or dog run.

All of this highlights an inescapable reality. If you want a perfectly manicured yard that is kept to perfection, you probably should not own a dog. These people frequently want to keep their dog from creating “paths” in the yard or prevent them from regularly urinating in the same place, which can cause the grass to discolor. If these are concerns, then you should truly consider whether a dog is right for you. Owning a dog means making certain concessions and compromises. If this is not possible for you, then your dog will pay the price for nothing more than being a dog and doing what comes naturally! Perhaps a cat would be a better choice or possibly no animals at all.

When a dog starts to scratch the ground with their paws, this activity usually leads to digging because there is something enticing at that particular spot. Use the shake can method (as described in Chapter 26) and then use one of the products mentioned above because your dog will be drawn back to whatever intrigued them to begin with. When you startle/stop the digging and successfully divert their attention to another activity, the original “enticement” remains! Apply an unpleasant substance to this area so when your dog returns to that spot they are “repelled” without you being connected to the situation. This creates a “self-correcting” situation that actually strengthens the concept of not digging. (*NOTE: All products used to repel or deter digging are only applied to the “area”. NEVER spray these items AT your dog.*)

A few other methods have proven effective for some dogs and in certain situations. When your dog has dug a hole (not a divot) in the yard, you can put chicken wire in the hole and cover it over with the dirt. The concept here is when the dog goes back to dig that area (dogs do tend to return to same areas); they will encounter the chicken wire which is unpleasant and is “self-correcting” when their paws unexpectedly encounter the chicken wire. Some people use stones or gravel in place of the chicken wire. Some people recommend putting the dog’s feces in the hole and covering it with dirt so when the dog digs, they encounter their feces and this will deter them from that area. To be honest, I have never used this technique. I am only sharing it because others sometimes recommend it.

All of these approaches can be effective with the right dog and under the right circumstances. Personally, I have never had to employ them with my dogs. That being said, I have placed items over an area where one of my dogs seemed to have particular interest. For example, when I had a new sprinkler system valve installed, that area was upturned and I knew it would be enticing to my dogs. I don’t mean for digging per se, but for investigating and exploring. I placed a small section of garden lattice over this area until the freshly upturned earth settled in and became part of the yard and the smells from the newly installed valve dissipated. I could have applied the deterrent products previously mentioned, but by laying the lattice over the area, I did not have to reapply a deterrent product until this area would cease to intrigue to my dogs. [*NOTE: I do not know that my dogs would have pawed at this area because I never allowed them the*

opportunity to do so. My preference is to react to a probable situation “before the fact”, rather than “after the fact”.]

A popular approach to digging issues is to create a “designated digging area” for your dog. This is an area specifically for acceptable digging. Some people use a dirt only area. Others set up a dirt area with a border around it. Some people use a child’s sand box or a children’s wading pool and fill these with dirt (usually not sand). I have never used this method, but many people find this approach effective.

A crucial element to using a designated digging area is that you must train your dog to dig ONLY in this area, which requires the right approach to prevent your dog’s “reinforced” digging instincts from applying to the rest of the yard. You need tremendous patience, time, understanding, and above all consistency. Know beforehand that your dog will make mistakes (by human terms, not dog terms) until they are fully trained and patterned to dig ONLY in this designated area. During this patterning process, it is not fair to punish your dog for digging in another area of the yard. Rather, you need to stay ahead of situations and be very observant and consistent during this pattern training process. View any digging in an undesired area as an “opportunity” to positively reinforce the designated digging area, not to punish the undesired digging. Your dog has not truly made a mistake because they are in the process of being pattern trained. Consider that providing an acceptable digging area is ostensibly like giving a dog their own sock or shoe to chew on and then expecting the dog to somehow distinguish between their acceptable sock or shoe and all other socks or shoes!

Let’s discuss implementing this approach. Once you have the designated digging area set up, bury toys and/or treats in this area. Take your dog to this area and help them discover that there are neat things in this area. Praise your dog when they find whatever you have buried. Periodically re-bury treats and/or toys for your dog to find so they are continuously intrigued and rewarded for digging and exploring in this area. During this phase, when you catch your dog digging elsewhere, verbally remind them to NO DIG, GOOD NO DIG and calmly take them to their designated digging area. There should be no yelling, physical force, spanking, or rubbing their nose in the undesired dug area. Rather, just use a light admonishment. Then, immediately take them to THEIR digging area. Do this happily and upbeat! If you are harsh with your reprimand and continue it beyond the initial light admonishment, the negative impact will carry over to their “positive digging area”. This is the same concept as “replacing” an item a dog should not chew with something they can chew. They will gradually learn where it is acceptable to dig.

Using a specified digging area is a matter of personal preference. This method will not work for all dogs and you cannot blame your dog if they fall into that category. Also, be aware that unless you have a way to cover the digging area, it will be rained on you will have mud. Consequently, you will still be dealing with muddy paws. Again, this is part of owning a dog. Also, know that training this method requires tremendous effort, patience, understanding, and above all consistency for it to have any chance of succeeding.

If your dog tries to dig under your fence, you **MUST** take measures to ensure they cannot dig out of the yard. For some dogs, this may only mean putting down some sort of barrier at the base of the fence. However, some dogs will dig under the barrier. In these instances, you can use a barrier that is partly below ground level. If you have an especially fervent digger, you may need to take measures that are more involved. One example is to dig a relatively deep trench around the entire fence line. Then, use chicken wire or something else that extends your fence **BELOW** ground level. Some people take concrete blocks or similar items, place them in the trench (lined up with the fence), and fill in the trench. If you install a new fence, make certain it extends a distance under the ground. Alternatively, you can have some below ground barrier installed at the same time as the fence. [*NOTE: Any item used as a barrier above ground or below ground must be safe and not pose any danger of injury to your dog should they encounter the item when attempting to dig.*]

Granted, all of these tactics are major undertakings. Nevertheless, I consider it well worth the time, effort, and expense to ensure your dog's safety and possible loss of life. Also, consider the emotional and financial toll you will suffer should your dog manage to dig out of the yard and becomes lost, hit by a car, mauled by another dog(s), or encounters a cruel person who harms your dog. Do not forget that you made the decision to bring a dog into your family and this carries tremendous responsibility and requires that you have realistic expectations.

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