



Learning to "Dig" Your Digging Dog

by Steve DiTullio

Digging can be very destructive to your property, whether it's your lawn, garden or landscaped yard. It is also very stressful and frustrating to an owner, who is usually unhappy with a digging dog.

Digging comes naturally to many types of dogs, especially Terrier breeds. They have been bred for hundreds of years to seek out the scent of rodents and vermin that live in the ground and under rocks, such as voles that tunnel and burrow, as do some insects. In some dogs, it's a genetic trait induced by their scent and prey drive; they will dig to find the reward of the chase. **If the dog is successful at finding something interesting and exciting, he or she may become a more determined digger strengthening the instinctive behavior driven by their prior successful finds.**

A lack of leadership in a home or just an instinctual characteristic to explore encourages a dog's drive to roam. They may dig to get under a fence or a barrier to get out on the move and discover new territory. Separation anxiety can also make a dog resort to digging to help relieve stress. And then some just dig because they really enjoy it. Sometimes a dog might encounter some tree roots, from my personal experience I have seen dogs have a blast just ripping them out of the ground. Digging can also be magnified in a high-energy dog that is not being fulfilled through physical and mental stimulation. **When dogs are left outside and alone with no structure or guidance, they will do what comes naturally, and to some of them, digging is high on the list.** Did you ever sit in front of a computer for two hours and the only physical activity is moving the mouse around the screen but your brain is engaged viewing all the new-found information. When you're done do you feel tired due to mental fatigue? **Well, a sure fire way to satisfy these needs in your dog that I love to use is a walk through the woods where a dog's primal instincts of scenting and roaming are engaged and the driving need to take action is gratified.** All these new and appealing scents can overwhelm a dog's senses, mentally fatiguing him, while his need for physical activity is being satisfied by just being on the move and following you.

Boredom in dogs that may be penned up in a yard can be dissatisfying, and they may resort to digging that can be destructive, even if the area is big, because the sights, smells and sounds can become mundane. **I use an analogy with clients that it would be similar if you took a walk around the block of beautiful homes for the first time, finding this new and unknown terrain interesting and stimulating. But if you walk around that same block ten times in two days, the familiarity of the route becomes much less significant and fails to**



stimulate senses that were totally engaged on that first experience. People keep themselves occupied and busy by doing activities of all varieties like watching TV, reading books, participating in sports and recreation... *you get the idea?*

Digging can be the result of something as simple as a dog looking for a cool damp spot to lie down in on a hot day (I am sure everyone has seen this). So they dig an area just under the soil surface and take a rest. **A shaded area or a dog house under a tree could possibly make a difference for this type of dog and resolve the digging issue.** Some dogs dig to bury bones or toys that may be valuable to them in order to hide the articles from other animals, or even dig them up later to use again. To some dogs, this is an instinctual behavior.

Mating is one of the strongest innate drives in both male and female dogs. The urge to mate when a female is in heat can escalate a dog's desire to roam to the point that their determination and resourcefulness will increase their attempts to escape. They will dig under barriers and fences to seek each other out. **Neutered males and spayed females will have a lower sexual drive making them less likely to seek each other out. This is another good rationale to spay and neuter family animals.**

There are dangers to a digging dog in that they could unearth something that could be hazardous to them like sharp debris causing cuts on the paws and in their mouths resulting in possible infections, buried electrical wiring or toxic materials that could be fatal, or some roots and plants that could result in illness. There is also a chance that they encounter an animal's burrow in the ground housing snakes or even sick and dead animals that are carriers of germs and parasites resulting in

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sickness or even death.

Digging problems can be hard to manage with a determined digger. **By understanding that a dog's drive to dig can be strong, you can help diffuse this behavior by being patient and not taking it personal. By reacting with calm, composed and constructive actions you can alleviate tension for both the dog and yourself.**

Solutions

Redirection of digging behavior can be accomplished by several methods that can help a destructive digging dog.

- Involving your dog in mental and physical activities such as easy obedience drills and games that are made fun and consistent can be a distraction.
- The use of interactive toys and treat dispensers, utilizing teaser balls and kongs with interesting rewards inside can be entertaining. Make it a game.
- You will hear me say it over and over again -- Regimented exercises and walks are one of the best and most effective ways of satisfying a dog's mental and physical drive.

- A content dog is easier to keep in the house for longer periods of time so there is less time outside to dig. In the house, you can create simple games of seeking out a toy or treat. Start by making it very easy to find and slowly make it more difficult and challenging. This will stimulate brain activity in the dog and help him become a better problem-solver.

- Dogs that dig under fences, especially chain link fences, are at risk of getting cut up or impaled by the pointed fencing ends. Anchoring the fence base or burying it a foot or two in the ground can help. Rocks can also be put at the base of the fence. Another method is putting something like sharp stones, chicken wire or even some chain link fence at the perimeter of the fences' base that can create an unpleasant sensation on their feet.

- Existing holes that have been dug can be filled with blown-up balloons and a thin layer of soil spread over them so that if they dig in these areas again the



balloons will pop and hopefully startle the dog enough to deter future digging. A good first strategy I've heard of is placing rocks in the hole with a thin layer of soil over them. Be mindful that whatever you place in the existing holes should not result in harming or hurting your dog.

- Set up a digging spot: Pick a safe area and use some loose soil or sand possibly in an exercise pen or even a sand box or a dirt pile. These designated areas can be the place where you can encourage digging by using safe, favored articles such as bones or toys that your dog has shown an interest in.

Discipline

The perfect time to discipline a dog for digging is when you catch him in the act. Your confident body posture with a designated command of "no dig" or "leave it" in a firm controlled voice (not yelling or carrying on excitedly) directly addresses this undesirable habit. Believe me; this tactic will help your dog easily understand your displeasure without the need to administer any physical punishment and can enhance your leadership skills as a dog owner.

Take this great opportunity to work on an easy instructional obedience drill of: "sit", "down", "stay" or even go on a structured walk putting the dog back into a following mind-set. Remember, in order to be your dog's "Guide", "Master", "Alpha Dog" or "Pack Leader," you must set the example so he will follow your lead by design.

Again, please remember not to take a dog's digging personally. This is something genetically hard wired in some dogs' personalities; make a solid effort and take the time to redirect it. You will both feel better and your yard will look better too! U

Steve DiTullio grew up in a family of animal lovers, especially dogs. He always had 1 to 3 dogs in his family. They were great pets but never trained well. Due to their misunderstanding of what it actually takes to fulfill a dog's needs, he became involved in training around 1992 with a great dog he had. That dog and the first trainer who trained them started his real understanding of what a dog needs (Structure, Guidance and Alliance). As he has been training and observing behaviors over the years, he met many people and their dogs. It motivates him to help both human and animal to understand each other. It is important to understand individual personalities of dogs and to be resourceful in managing unwanted behaviors and rewarding the good behaviors. The guide must always maintain a relaxed but direct demeanor to accomplish communication. Visit him online: www.forpawzdogtraining.com or steveddogtraining.com

