

Behavior Solutions: Digging

Digging holes comes naturally to dogs, but if your yard is so dotted with craters that it looks like a slice of Swiss cheese, digging has become an undesirable behavior for you and your pet. Not only do holes destroy your landscaping and turn your yard into an ankle-busting obstacle course, your dog could burrow out of the safe confines of your property and become injured or lost. By following the practical advice from the experts at Starmark Academy, you can alleviate and even eliminate this annoying, persistent problem.

Why Dogs Dig

Dogs may get down and dirty because they are in search of a cool spot for a nap, or because they want to bury a tasty treat or a treasured toy for safekeeping. Some dogs, such as terriers, dig because they have been bred to hunt small, burrowing animals, even if the pursuit leads them underground. An unneutered male may dig under a fence to pursue a female in heat, and some females will scratch out primitive nests when they are expecting pups.

These are normal behaviors, and, except in the case of the zealous male, they are not usually a problem. Excessive hole digging, though, is almost always an outgrowth of boredom or anxiety. Your dog may not be getting the physical activity or mental stimulation he needs, so he digs just to have something to do. Eliminating the source of this fretfulness in your dog is the only way to curtail the behavior.

Effecting a Positive Change

At Starmark Animal Behavior Center, we know that the best way to prevent your dog from digging is to stop him from acquiring the vice in the first place. If you must leave your dog home alone, consider putting him in a crate or in a dog-proofed area of your home instead of allowing him to run loose in your yard or be tethered there. Obedience training is key to improving communication and enhancing the relationship with your dog. It will help your dog become a welcome and mannerly member of your household instead of being exiled to the yard for bad behavior, only to engage in more bad behavior there.

If your dog already has a habit of digging, you must first figure out why he is digging in order to eliminate the behavior. Most dogs dig out of boredom, so first be sure that your dog is getting plenty of physical activity and mental stimulation. Schedule time every day for training and exercise. Provide your dog with a variety of toys and hide them around the yard for him to discover on his own. Mental stimulation toys, such as the Everlasting Treat Ball, are one way to keep your dog happy and stimulated. After working to get the two, hard, edible chew discs off the ends of the Everlasting Treat Ball, he will have to roll and paw at the toy to extract the smaller treats hidden inside. Hiding several interactive toys around the yard will keep your dog busy for hours. Refer to Starmark's "Behavior Solution: Problem Prevention" for more ideas on how to use interactive toys.

Because dogs may dig for cooler ground when they are hot, be sure your dog has a comfortable shaded area outside where he can escape the heat of the day without having to dig. Always be careful to leave plenty of fresh water out for your dog too. A water-filled kiddie pool is another way to keep your dog cool and comfortable. Some dogs dig to go after small animals

underground, so do what you can to evict any burrowing yard tenants that might entice your pet. For terriers and other breeds that like to dig, you can provide a sandbox as a designated, acceptable area for digging. Burying bones or toys in the sandbox for your dog to uncover will provide him with an acceptable outlet for his digging urge and keep him occupied.

Fill existing holes with feces or leaves and pine cones to discourage your dog from digging up the same area again. A deterrent device, which looks and acts like a mousetrap, but will not harm your dog, is available at many pet supply retailers. This device can be placed in the holes and then lightly covered with dirt. Your dog will trigger the trap to go off when he digs, which will startle and discourage him even when you cannot be there to supervise. It is important to use the devices made specifically for this purpose. Never use an actual mousetrap because it can harm your dog.

If you must keep your dog in the yard, build a kennel with concrete flooring to restrict his access to digging areas. The kennel should be large enough for your dog to move about freely and have room for a potty area. It also should provide shade, a doghouse for shelter and be supplied with plenty of water. Whenever possible, supervise your dog when he is in the yard and don't leave him outside alone for long stretches. If you keep an eye on your dog, you can catch and correct him if he does begin to dig by immediately squirting him with a water pistol, using a shaker can to startle him or even saying: "No!" before taking him to his designated digging area.

Using a remote trainer is also an effective way to train your dog not to dig. The collar can be activated even if you are inside your house as long as you can see your dog. Because the correction is non-directional, your dog will not associate the unpleasant sensation generated by the remote trainer with you.

As soon as you see your dog begin to dig or scratch at the ground, give him a brief correction via the remote collar. *Never correct your dog after he has dug a hole.* He must be caught in the act in order to make the connection between the digging and the correction. Also, you must catch and correct your dog for digging in a variety of areas in the yard so he associates the correction with digging in general and not just with digging in one particular spot. A variety of remote collars, which come complete with detailed training manuals, are available at larger pet retailers or online at www.dogtrainingandboardingaustin.com, so be sure that you choose the one that will work best for your dog.

The “Hole-istic” Approach

Digging is a normal behavior in dogs; compulsive digging is not. Your yard should not look like a prairie dog colony just because your dog spends time there. At Starmark we believe a well-behaved and well-trained dog is a happy dog and a better companion. Each dog is unique, and so is his owner. That’s why we use a variety of techniques, customizing your dog’s training experience to suit his personality and your individual needs. Using our techniques, which emphasize consistency and patience, your dog can learn that there are better ways to spend his time than getting down and dirty.

Trainer Developed: Academy Tested

The certified training and behavior specialists at Starmark Academy created this behavior solutions guide with you and your dog’s needs in mind. Products mentioned in this guide are available at pet supply retailers, as well as online at our Web site www.dogtrainingandboardingaustin.com. All products, guides and videos are tested and approved by the training directors of Starmark Academy, our accredited school for professional

dog trainers. It is the hands-on experience of our training division, combined with the vast technical knowledge and experience of the Starmark Academy staff, that allows us to bring you useful and unique dog training and behavior solutions. We train dogs just like yours every day; we work with owners just like you every day. Thank you for choosing Starmark, the world leader in pet education.

For additional pet solutions and information about our products, please visit Starmark online at our Web sites: www.dogtrainingandboardingaustin.com; www.schoolfordogtrainers.com; and www.starmarkacademy.com.

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