

Digger Dogs

Do visitors whistle World War I tunes when laying eyes on the trenches in your backyard? Has your once lush green lawn begun to resemble a minefield? If so, your dog's digging problem has gotten out of control. But short of paving over the yard, is there a way to manage this passion for excavation? Absolutely!

To Dig For

Different dogs dig for different reasons, so before looking for solutions, it's important to determine why your dog digs. Many reasons for digging are often breed dependent. Heavy-coated, spitz-type dogs, such as sled dogs and chow chows, dig cooling pits during hot weather to make themselves more comfortable. Earth dogs—those bred to tunnel underground to dispatch prey, such as short-legged terriers and dachshunds—are simply obeying their natural impulses as they dig up the yard to find gophers, moles or other “vermin.” Scent hounds (beagles, bassets and coonhounds) and unneutered males of any breed type often dig along fence lines because the lures of small game, food or females in heat are especially strong. And adolescent diggers (dogs ages six to 18 months) do so because they're loaded with youthful exuberance and have nothing to do. They dig because they're outside unaccompanied and have motive, means and opportunity. The common denominator for all of these dogs, however, is that they dig because they find it rewarding.

By far the most common digger is the bored dog. Without anything to sustain his attention, the bored canine wiles away his time outdoors by excavating the yard. Why? Because it's there, and digging gives him something to do. While often an adolescent, a bored digger can be nearly any age. Social isolation can also trigger this behavior.

Two options are available to stop the digging—extinguish the need to dig or channel the behavior into an appropriate outlet. If your hot husky is digging cooling pits, keep him inside in the air conditioning during the hottest times of the day, or set up a refreshing kiddie pool for him. If your Jack Russell terrier is on mole patrol, call in a professional pest removal service. For the intact (unneutered) male dog who digs to break free and consort with “the ladies,” book him a date with the veterinary surgeon. Roaming is one of several behaviors considerably diminished by neutering.

If your dog digs because he's bored or lonely, train him to behave when home alone, and keep him indoors. When you do give him backyard access, go out with him and throw a ball, toss a Frisbee™ or practice obedience commands. Hide biscuits around the yard and encourage him to track them down. Go for a walk together. Invite neighborhood dogs over for a play date. When a dog's kept busy and mentally stimulated, he's less apt to dig.

If your fence cannot contain the yearning for freedom, fortify the barrier. Attach chicken wire to the fence a foot or so from the bottom, sink the wire six to 12 inches into the ground and curve it two to three feet in toward the yard. When your digger dog hits the chicken wire, it should stop him.

Dig or Die

Some dogs, however, have such a strong innate desire to dig that little can dissuade them otherwise. Many earth dogs fall into this category—even if your yard is vermin-free, they'll still dig because that's what they were born to do. These dogs need an outlet for their drives. A digging pit provides the perfect compromise—your dog can dig to his heart's content, while preserving your landscaping.

Choose a small patch in the yard where it's okay for your dog to dig. Circle the area with stones or other visual markers. Loosen up the soil and mix in a little sand. Hide a few toys, chewies or biscuits in the soil to increase the rewards, then encourage the dog to dig in the pit. The first few times you let him out in the yard, make sure to accompany him so you can catch him in any mistakes and lure him over to dig in the appropriate spot. If your dog attempts to dig anywhere except in the pit, mark the incorrect behavior with “wrong,” and call him over to the pit. Praise and reward him when he heads to the pit on his own. Fill in the pit when needed, and add goodies from time to time so that the pit will remain an attractive place for the dog to visit.

Once you've determined why your dog digs and have followed up by providing him with a cooling pool, fortified fence, plentiful play or a digging pit of his own, you can bid adieu to trench warfare and let the kids out in the yard once more—without fearing that they'll disappear into a canine-constructed pothole.