

### QUESTION & ANSWER OF THE MONTH

# DIGGING

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Clients often report that their dogs are digging up their yards. What practical suggestions can I give them?

A dog may dig in the yard for many reasons (see **Why Dogs Dig**). The first step in treatment is to determine the motivation for the behavior. Finding out what you need to know requires targeted questions. Aside from addressing the client's presenting complaint, questioning should address the pet-owner interaction and any other concerns the owner has about the pet's behavior.



## WHY DOGS DIG

- Northern breeds, such as huskies and malamutes, may dig holes to remain cool in the summer.
- Predatory breeds, such as terriers, may dig to flush out rodents or other prey.
- Some dogs dig as a direct result of odors or sounds from voles and moles.
- A pregnant female may dig when nesting.
- Dogs dig to bury or retrieve valued items, such as a bone.
- Dog that do not wish to be confined or that have separation anxiety or other anxieties may dig to escape.
- Intact dogs may dig out of the yard when in heat or to find mating opportunities.
- Some dogs—particularly puppies and highly energetic dogs—dig for fun, especially if they are not provided with sufficient stimulation or attention.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK THE OWNER

- Family composition, daily schedule, and other pets in the home.
- What type of daily exercise and playtime is provided to the dog? How frequent and how long are the sessions? What type of games do you play (fetch, chase, wrestling)? Do you walk your dog on a daily basis? If not, why not?
- Why is the dog put outside? How long is the dog outside? Is it supervised during that time?
- What type of training has been or is being done with the dog?
- Does the pet engage in other undesirable behaviors, such as chewing or destruction, when indoors?
- Where is the dog left when unsupervised or when no one is home?
- Does the behavior occur when you are present, away from home, or both?
- How long has this behavior been occurring?
- Are there small rodents in the lawn?
- How has digging been addressed in the past?
- Does your dog ever growl, snarl, lunge, snap or bite at you or visitors to your home?
- Does the pet show fearful or anxious responses (trembling, hiding, indoor elimination, vocalization, destruction) to storms, fireworks, or loud noises?<sup>1</sup> Has it experienced a fearful stimulus while home alone or out in the yard?

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## Protection

If the dog is digging to avoid the heat, it must be provided with shade and/or be brought inside in very hot weather. In other situations, allowing the dog a cooling area or a small pool of water may be useful.

## Hunting

Since predation is a highly motivated behavior, if the dog is digging in response to prey under the soil, these animals must be eliminated or digging will continue. If this is not possible, then when outside the dog must either be on a leash and accompanied by an adult or confined in an inescapable run that could be paved with gravel, patio tiles, asphalt, or concrete. However, the dog should not be placed in this area without sufficient interaction, stimulation, or exercise.

## Separation Anxiety

If the dog must be left outside when the owners are not home because it is destructive when left alone in the house, it may have separation anxiety. Therefore, questioning should focus on the signs of separation anxiety and treatment should focus on the underlying disorder.<sup>2</sup> Other anxieties, such as storm phobias, may contribute to digging behavior, especially if the dog is trying to escape from the yard.

## Mating Behavior

Intact dogs that dig to escape the yard to pursue potential mates must be spayed or neutered. If the animal is to be used for breeding, then it must be kept under strict supervision or leash-walked, especially when a female dog is in estrus or a male dog is in proximity to females in estrus.

## Exercise/Play

Dogs that do not have sufficient exercise, stimulation, or training may dig to keep occupied,



### WHAT TO DO

- Determine the motivation for the digging.
- Address exercise and activity needs of the dog.
- Make sure underlying fears and/or anxieties are not contributing to the behavior.
- Spay and neuter intact animals to prevent roaming.
- Never leave dogs outside unattended for long periods or when you are not at home.
- If necessary, prepare a designated digging area for the dog.

which may seem to be digging for no reason. In this situation, treatment should focus on appropriate pet-owner interactions, daily exercise, play, and training. If the dog is unable to be walked because of pulling or other unacceptable leash behaviors, then a head collar may help increase control and allow walking on a daily basis. Before leaving the dog out in the yard, the owners should first be sure that the dog has had adequate exercise, stimulation, and play such as fetch using two objects to keep the game going. They should also leave interactive toys to redirect play and exploration to appropriate objects.

For most dogs this should be adequate, but others seem to really enjoy digging and may need a more targeted approach.

In such situations, it may be appropriate to create an area where digging is permissible. This area could be delineated by a border of railroad ties or brick and filled with soft dirt. To make it an attractive location for the dog to dig, the owner can bury things there that the dog would like to dig up. These could be a Kong toy (Kong Pet Toys; Golden, CO) stuffed with peanut butter, a Booda bone (Aspen Pet Products; Denver, CO), or other items the dog might find attractive. Initially, the objects should be lightly covered but should gradually be made harder to find; this technique will encourage the dog to dig in the designated area as opposed to other locations in the yard.

## Direct Intervention

In some situations, supervision and direct intervention (shaker can, verbal reprimand, water sprayer) can be used to prevent inappropriate digging when the owner is present. However, many dogs will learn not to dig when the owner is present but will continue to dig when unsupervised, especially if their activity and interaction needs are not met. In some cases, remote punishment (motion sensor sprinklers, pulling on a long leash, remote citronella collar), booby-traps (placing chicken wire, rocks, or water where the pet digs), or covering the surface with asphalt or patio stones might teach the pet to avoid the digging site even in the owner's absence. However, these techniques do not prevent the pet from digging in other locations. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.