Digging is an Instinctive Behavior in Dogs

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Q. Why do dogs dig?

A. Most behaviors of dogs are either the product of instinct, or a learned behavior. Digging behavior is no exception; it is an instinct. In addition, there are certain breeds, Terriers and Dachshunds, for instance, which were bred specifically for their ability to dig out game, such as badgers, foxes, and otters. They have an even greater digging instinct.

Dogs dig for a variety of reasons.

- Dogs will often dig out of boredom. If you leave your dog out alone in the yard for any length of time, he may dig just for something to do. Play with him out there, or provide him with chew toys or interactive toys like a Kong or Pet Planet rubber toy with treats stuffed inside.
- Digging is often used as a means of escape. Your dog may want to leave a fenced yard because there are so many more interesting things to do elsewhere.
- If you have an intact (unspayed, or unneutered) dog, he or she may be digging to escape in order to mate with another dog. If you do not plan to breed your dog, a good way to prevent digging for this reason is to neuter him or spay her.
- Since deeper layers of soil tend to be cooler, your dog may be digging to find relief from the heat. Always provide a cool, shady place for your dog to rest when he is outside.
- Dogs are great savers. They will bury bones or other treats 'for a rainy day' when they may need them.
- If you use bone or blood meal to fertilize your garden, the scent may be irresistible. A dog may dig and dig trying to find that nonexistent bone.
- Any dog may dig to excavate a den. A female dog may dig in order to provide a nest for puppies, whether she is pregnant or not.

The trick to stopping any pet's unwanted behavior is understanding it and then manipulating it into a behavior of which we approve. There are obvious things you can do to prevent digging, some of which are mentioned above. Here are other general solutions:

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- Give your dog a place where he is permitted to dig and train him, with praise and treats, to dig in that spot and not in an inappropriate place. A good place is a sandy area, an area that has already been dug up and where the soil is loose, or an area where there is a lot of shade. A sandy area has the added benefit in that, sand is much easier to clean off than dirt.

  Decide where this place will be, soften the soil, and then bury a favorite treat there. Bring your dog over to the area, say "dig!" and praise him when he uncovers the treat. Repeat until the behavior is learned. If you catch him digging in an inappropriate area, say "no!" and then take him over to the desired area and say "dig," followed by praise if he digs. This training may take several days.
- Deter him from digging in inappropriate areas. There are many different ways to do this, including putting pepper, small amounts of citrus or diluted ammonia on the inappropriate area. There are also commercial products such as Keep Off, No-Dig, or Get Off My Garden. These products work by creating a scent in the area which is repugnant to animals, or which interferes with the animal's sense of smell. Some products can be used directly on plants and grass, some cannot. This is probably the easiest of the solutions. This will also work at repelling nuisance animals other than your own. Burying chicken wire, or covering the dirt with landscape rocks may also be used to deter dogs from digging.

- Providing a dog more acceptable forms of exercise such as games of fetch, long walks, and swimming can help release some of the energy and provide relief from the boredom that may trigger the digging.

Digging, although deeply ingrained, can be unlearned. Be consistent and unwavering and you will be able to find a solution.

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