



THE DOGGY DIGEST

TRAINING TIPS BROUGHT TO YOU BY MUTTS WITH MANNERS

Why Dogs Dig--and How to Teach Them Not To
By Trelle Dandridge - Mutts with Manners

Few things frustrate dog owners more than discovering a cratered yard. Before you grab the shovel to fill another hole, it helps to understand why dogs dig—and how to redirect this natural behavior in ways that keep both your dog and your landscaping happy.

Why Dogs Dig: Understanding the Behavior

Digging is a perfectly normal canine behavior with deep roots in instinct and survival. Dogs may dig for several reasons:

- **Temperature Regulation:** Some dogs dig to create a cool spot to lie in on warm days.
- **Boredom or Excess Energy:** Dogs without enough mental or physical stimulation may dig simply because it's fun and releases energy.
- **Scent and Prey Drive:** For scent hounds and terriers, digging is instinctual—those noses tell them something is down there.
- **Resource Hoarding:** Dogs who once fended for themselves, such as former strays, may dig to bury bones, treats, or toys—saving “treasures” for later.
- **Attention-Seeking:** If digging earns a big reaction from you, some dogs learn that the behavior gets them noticed.

Knowing the motivation helps you create a training plan that meets your dog's needs while protecting your yard.

Step 1: Supervision and Interruption

If you can supervise your dog outdoors, you can interrupt digging before it becomes a habit.

- **Supervise and redirect.** When you see your dog start to dig, calmly interrupt with a cheerful “Stop!” or “Ah-ah!”, not angry or loud, just enough to get their attention.
- **Follow up immediately** with a cue your dog already knows, such as “Come,” “Leave It,” or “Look at Me.”
- **Reward compliance** with praise, treats, or a quick game of fetch, teaching your dog that listening pays off.
- **Increase enrichment.** Many diggers are simply bored. Rotate toys, practice short training sessions, or provide puzzle feeders to keep that brain busy.

When You Can't Supervise

Dogs who dig when left alone in the yard for long stretches—like while their people are at work for eight hours—are often digging out of boredom, frustration, or anxiety. Long, unsupervised hours can turn a natural behavior into a hard-to-break habit.

If you'll be gone for several hours, your dog will likely be **happier and safer indoors.**

- **Crate training** provides structure and prevents rehearsal of unwanted behaviors like digging or fence-climbing. The crate should always feel like a comfortable, positive space, not a punishment.
- Offer food puzzles, frozen Kongs, or a safe chew while you're away so your dog has an outlet for energy.
- Make sure they've had a potty break and plenty of exercise before you leave, so they're relaxed and ready to rest. Consider a mid-day break from a friend of the family or a local pet sitter.



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- If your dog struggles with **separation anxiety**, leaving them outside alone doesn't fix the problem, it can actually make it worse. Digging may become a coping mechanism or even an attempt to escape.

In those cases, focus on confidence-building, gradual independence training, and daily physical and mental exercise. When you return home, give your dog a chance to burn energy in healthy ways—walks, sniff-and-explore time, short training sessions, or play in their designated dig pit.

Step 2: Use Natural Deterrents (Poop in the Hole!)

One harmless, time-tested deterrent is to scoop your dog's own poop and place it in the freshly dug hole before filling it back in. Most dogs dislike the smell and will avoid re-digging there.

Note: This method only works if your dog doesn't eat poop. If your dog does, skip this step, otherwise, it can reinforce the very behavior you're trying to discourage.

Why Some Dogs Eat Poop (Coprophagia)

Poop-eating, or coprophagia, can happen for several reasons:

- Nutritional deficiency (sometimes linked to poor diet or parasites)
- Attention-seeking behavior
- Learned habit from a mother cleaning her puppies or shelter stress
- Boredom or anxiety

If this behavior persists, talk to your veterinarian to rule out medical causes and discuss safe management strategies.

Step 3: Provide a Legal Digging Zone — “The Dig Pit”

For determined diggers, giving them an approved place to dig can work wonders. Think of it as redirecting, not forbidding, a natural behavior.

How to Build a Dig Pit

1. **Choose the Spot:** Pick a shady, soft-soil area or a raised sandbox (children's sandboxes or pools work great). If your dog digs to cool off, choose a shaded location.
2. **Prepare the Surface:** Remove rocks or debris, and fill with sand, loose soil, or a mix of both. You can line the bottom with landscape fabric to define the space and use landscaping stones around the pit to frame it.
3. **Bury the Treasure:** Hide a few dog-safe items—rubber toys, nylon bones, or treats—just under the surface. Make this spot exciting and rewarding! Let your dog watch you bury the treasures at first.



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- **Add a Cue:** Introduce a phrase like "Go dig!" or "Find it!" each time you lead your dog to the pit. Over time, this cue tells them this is the right place to dig.
- **Reward Choice:** Praise or toss a treat when your dog digs in the pit. If they start digging elsewhere, gently redirect with "Go dig!" and reward when they return to the pit.

Making the Dig Pit Extra Fun

- Rotate buried toys or bones every few days to keep it novel.
- Add scent enrichment by hiding a treat inside a paper cup or sprinkling dog-safe herbs (like parsley or mint) in the sand.
- On hot days, lightly mist the pit to make the sand cool and inviting.

Teaching Tip: Use Successive Approximations

If your dog doesn't know what to do, guide them step by step. Toss a treat into the pit to encourage pawing, mark with "YES!" when they scratch or dig, and reward generously. Before long, they'll be joyfully excavating only in their approved zone.

Pro Tip: Dig Pits as Gentle Enrichment

For senior dogs, mobility-challenged pups, or those recovering from injury, a soft dig pit offers safe, low-impact enrichment. It encourages natural foraging movements, provides mental stimulation, and allows them to participate in outdoor play without overexertion.

Step 4: Manage the Environment

- Limit unsupervised yard time if digging happens when you're not watching.
- Provide shade or a cooling mat if your dog digs for heat relief.
- Add fencing, chicken wire, or garden barriers near favorite dig spots to prevent relapse.
- Increase structured exercise, tired dogs are less likely to start excavating.

Step 5: Stay Positive and Patient

Digging can be persistent, especially if it's self-reinforcing. Remember: yelling or punishing your dog doesn't teach what to do instead, it only adds stress. Stay consistent with supervision, reward calm and redirected choices, and manage the environment.

With time and consistency, you'll help your dog understand that digging is a game best played where you choose.