

## Digging

Question: My rat terrier is making tunnels all over my flower beds. I can plant flowers in the morning and by the afternoon; he has torn the beds and destroyed my flowers. I scold him, and show him what he has done wrong. I know that he understands because he looks guilty when I come out the back door. When I see what he has done, he always looks away. I am at my wits end; can I ever enjoy my flower beds again?

Answer: Digging is a common issue between dogs and their owners. Although owners see this as a problem, digging is a natural behavior and one that is, pardon the pun, deeply rooted. Terriers for instance love to dig. It's not only pleasurable but also a genetic predisposition just like retrieving is for Labradors and herding is for Border collies.

Dogs may dig to bury coveted objects, to find a cool spot in the summer, and sometimes just because it feels good between their toes. Dogs prefer soft ground to hard so cultivated flower beds are a target. We also tend to mulch in fertilizer and other nutrients which adds to the aroma of the soil and to the allure. I have known some clever canines who watch their owner digging in the soil for a short time, then start digging right alongside them, joining in the fun.

Knowing that digging is natural and enjoyable, it is best to plan a space for your dog to dig. The good news is that, for the most part, dogs are habitual in their digging location. Rather than try to move the dog's digging spot, see if the garden can be planned around it. If this is unrealistic, digging can be discouraged in a particular location by placing a layer of chicken wire under the soil. Fill deep holes with large rocks before laying down the wire. Be sure to secure the ends so they can't be dug up. Then place a layer of soil over the top. Don't bury it too deeply or you will defeat its purpose. Avoid fertilizers, especially the organic ones in the location you are trying to discourage your dog from digging. Usually, your pet will abandon the location for a new one once he finds that the dirt is not longer soft and fun to dig in.

As you are trying to relocate your dogs digging spot, try to understand the reason behind your dog's pastime. Recreational diggers can be enticed to switch locations if you bury a tidbit or favorite toy. Make sure that the soil is soft and that you don't bury too deeply. Some dogs are just trying to beat the heat so the new location will have to be cool and shady. You may even find your pet will prefer splashing about and lounging in a small backyard pool.

If you guess wrong and your pup ends up digging your newly planted flowers, unless you catch him right in the act, forget the scolding. Dogs only make the association with praise or a

correction if it's associated with their direct behavior. The avoidance behavior that you are seeing isn't from guilt, but rather in anticipation of what your dog sees as unpredictable owner outbursts. When a dog looks away, he is sending appeasement signals, trying to get you to calm down. Trying to correct so far after the infraction will not alter the digging behavior, it will only create a rift in your relationship with your pet and raise your blood pressure.

One of the gifts of humanity is our creativity. When dealing with innate behaviors, flexibility and imagination are far more effective than punishment in producing workable solutions.