

Keep Houdini at Home

Learn how to contain your dogs' knack for escaping.

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"Smart dogs with lack of intellectual stimulation will escape to get that stimulation," said Diane Arrington, director of Pet Perfect in Dallas. "We give them reasons to stay home. We have owners use more education, more challenging things for the dogs, like agility or flyball. Or teach tricks like crawl, bow, back up, go find things. These are useful and fun.

Dogs stimulated at home tend to stay around. "Home is where his leaders live," Arrington said. "If he thinks he's the top dog, he has to go out looking. If he knows you're the leader, he doesn't."

For dogs that jump or dig out of the yard, Arrington recommends preventing escape for two weeks while the dog's rank is lowered through training. "Teaching raises the owner's rank and lowers the dog's," she said. "Teaching dominant, especially using a quiet, calm manner."

Most dogs enjoy their fenced yards and do not attempt escape unless left alone too long. "Comet loves the fenced yard," said Joy Spirare, dog owner and pet-sitter from Bellingham, Washington. "She can just lie out there in the sun." A fenced yard also gives the owner peace of mind. "It's a safety net," Spirare said. "I don't have to worry that she's going to run down the driveway and get squished by a car."

Some people think a fenced yard will damage property values, but that isn't necessarily true. "It's not going to be detrimental to the selling price," said Sheila Rooney, a Realtor with Bay Village Realty in Orleans, Massachusetts. "Lots of houses we sell have a full fenced yard, pen-type areas or those electronic fences. An existing fence might be a real plus to a buyer who has a dog."

Some dogs seem to regard a fence as a challenge to be overcome, no matter how much they enjoy the yard or how much exercise they get.

Other dogs leap or dig to freedom. For climbers and jumpers, an anti-jump harness allows the dog to walk around freely but not jump or climb.

Another cure: Top the fence with a strand of electric pet fencing, similar to the livestock variety but giving a milder shock. A lower strand of the same wire will stop most escapes under the fence. String the wire on six-inch insulators about a foot from the ground. If the dog tries to go under, it gets a shock.

Diggers may also be deterred if they find their feces in any gap under the fence.