

Stop That Barking Dog

Get to the bottom of what causes a dog's barking to successfully manage it.

By September Morn

Q. We have a 5-year-old Border Collie and a 9-month-old English Shepherd. When we are at work (for eight to nine hours), the dogs are either in the or in the laundry room out of the weather. We live in Seattle, and have neighbors on all sides. One neighbor has recently complained that the English Shepherd is barking "at every little thing" and "for hours on end" when we are at work. I don't want to be a bad neighbor, and would like to stop Gadget from nuisance barking. I have read about spray collars, sonic devices/collars, and shock collars. Do they work? What method do you recommend?

A. Some neighbors are especially sensitive to dog noise, so it would be good to know how much time your dog actually spends barking when you're away. Some dogs do over-bark, whether from boredom or a sense of duty to protect the home. But sometimes a dog will get blamed for barking excessively, when it's really a different dog in another yard who's making the noise. It would be a good idea to check with some of your other neighbors, to get a wider point of view on how bad Gadget's barking problem really is.

Anti-bark collars and similar devices work by causing an unpleasant or painful result when a dog barks. These devices work better for some dogs than others. Often it will seem to work at first, but after a week or so, many dogs resume their barking habit, despite the unpleasant sensation or pain caused by the anti-barking device. In any case, those devices don't address the reasons for the dog's barking, so you'll need to determine what's causing your English Shepherd to bark too much. Two common causes of excessive barking are mental boredom and insufficient daily exercise.

The Old English Shepherd was bred to herd and protect livestock and do other chores around a farm. Gadget may be acting out his hereditary role as best he can, barking at anything that moves or that stands still for too long in the "wrong" place. If that's the case, he might be quieter if he can't see outside the fence, so perhaps you could block his view somehow. He might bark at sounds, though, and there's not much you can do to soundproof a fence.

If, after you speak with other neighbors, you determine Gadget really is over-barking, you might need to leave both dogs indoors during your absence, to keep peace in your neighborhood. If you must do that, check into hiring a pet sitter to visit daily to take them out for an exercise and potty walk. Also start giving Gadget more exercise before you leave in the mornings and when you return home at the end of the day. Some daily training may also help keep him quieter, by satisfying his need for a job. Training for obedience, agility, musical freestyle, or other activity, will provide both mental and physical stimulation and exercise, which will calm your dog by making him feel he has a purposeful existence – and that is very important to a dog bred for work.