

Dogs that Dig

Find the cause of your dog's digging and win back your yard.

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Suzanne Sheldon thought she had found the perfect technique to stop her Golden Retrievers from digging holes in her back yard. A dog trainer gave her the tip: Bury the dogs' feces in the holes they dug. But Sheldon said, "I ended up with more holes in different places. Comet created new holes and StellaLuna redug the old ones."

On to Plan B. When the dog started digging near the fences, Sheldon dutifully filled the holes with bricks. That stopped them, at least in those spots. But the diggers turned their attention to other parts of the yard, splaying dirt in their wake. "I ended up with a small mountain in the yard. In two years, they completely destroyed the grass."

On to a remedy that stopped the digging for good. In that yard, at least. She moved across town to Skokie, Ill., a Chicago suburb.

A year later, Sheldon runs the Retrievers in a park almost every morning to tire them and curb their digging desires, a technique that dog trainers recommend. "I try to make sure they have toys in the yard and don't leave them out there too long," Sheldon said, echoing another favorite prevention tip from trainers.

Yet, the dogs haven't totally forgotten digging. Parts of Sheldon's year-old yard soon may need re-seeding and she is pondering adding a snow fencethose orange plastic-grid buffersto protect the most damaged area. "I keep telling myself it doesn't really manerit's just a back yard, and my front yard is really pretty." Sheldon said.

Is this the fate to which dog owners must resign themselvesgiving up in utter frustration when their dogs are devoted diggers? No, say trainers and veterinarians. As warm summer weather encourages dogs to dig in the cool earth for a respite, experts say you have at least as many techniques to divest crater-makers as reasons dogs dig.

For dogs, digging is in the genes. Wild ancestors dug to hide their food and create dens to rear pups. Humans helped nature along by selecting for the trait in breeds used to dig up vermin and other prey from earthen tunnels.

Terriers, the most popular group for this job, even take their name from the Latin word for earthterra. Scottish Terriers and West Highland White Terriers, in particular, were bred to be efficient digging machines. Their turned-out feet let them shovel dirt to the sidean improvement over Fox Terriers and other straight-legged Terriers that eventually fell into a hole as dirt piled up behind them. "If you've been dealing with dogs that have been bred to dig, it's very difficult to stop the digging," said Stanley Coren, author of *The Intelligence of Dogs* (Bantam, 1995) and *Why We Love The Dogs We Do* (Free Press, 1999) and psychology professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Look for a reason for the digging by studying when and where your dog digs. "The most important part is to address the cause," said Bonnie Beaver, veterinarian at Texas A&M University in College Station and diplomate of American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.