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## Synopsis: Problem Digging

**CAUSES:** Dogs dig for many reasons: they dig to bury bones and pits when it's cold; they dig to create a cool space when it's hot; they dig up prey (mice, rats, rabbits etc.); and pregnant bitches dig dens. Basically, dogs dig because it is a highly enjoyable and normal canine activity. If the dog receives little exercise and is confined to the yard for long periods without supervision, most likely digging will become a habit.

**GOAL:** To redirect digging to an appropriate location

### **PROCEDURE:**

#### **1. Holistic Approach**

Lack of physical and psychological exercise, prolonged confinement, boredom and loneliness are general causes for behavior problems. If the owner provides the dog with more opportunity for walks, runs, play and training, the incidence of behavior problems, such as digging, will progressively decrease.

#### **2. Prevent Misbehavior in Owner's Absence**

Until the dog has been taught not to dig up the flower -bed or vegetable patch, it should not be given free access to these areas when the owner is absent. Temporarily, the dog should be confined indoors, or to a dog run. Confinement is not the ultimate solution, it is only an interim measure until the dog can be trusted not to destroy the yard.

#### **3. Provide Dog with Appropriate Outlet for Digging**

If the dog loves to dig, provide it with the opportunity. Take the dog to the beach once a week. Put the dog in a "down-stay" and bury a treat three feet down and then instruct the dog to dig and praise it as it does so. In addition, provide the dog with a digging pit, just as parents would provide their child with a sand box. A 3 x 6 foot area is sufficient for any sized dog. Dig the area to a depth of two feet and mix in a little sand (this helps it to drain in the rainy season). When locating the digging pit, bear in mind the reasons for digging. For example, if the dog is excavating a cooling pit, locate it in a shady area, do not place it on the south side of the house unprotected from the summer sun.

#### **4. Reward Appropriate Digging**

Teach the dog to dig in its pit. Take some of its favorite toys and treats and make a fuss of burying them while the dog is watching. Initially, leave some poking through the surface. Instruct the dog to "Dig in your pit". Praise it as it scratches the dirt and enthusiastically repeat the request: "Good dog, dig in your pit, dig in your pit, good dog," Once the dog gets the idea, the objects may be buried deeper. In addition to the owner's praise, the dog's activity is self- rewarding. The dog receives immediate gratification each time it finds a buried item. Treats may be eaten right away and unearthed toys signal the prospect of a play session. For example, if the dog uncovers a tennis ball, play a short game of 'fetch' and then bury the ball again. Last thing at night bury a couple of treats in the pit and first thing in the morning instruct the dog to dig them up. Each time the dog is given a large bone, tell it to "dig in your pit". With any luck the dog will bury the bone in the designated area. Dogs love this 'exercise', and for many, the entire retraining program may be accomplished within one Saturday afternoon.

#### **5. Reprimand Inappropriate Digging**

Once the dog understands that it is an acceptable and enjoyable activity to dig in its pit, and thoroughly comprehends the meaning of the command "Dig in your pit", it is time to teach it that digging elsewhere is taboo.

**A) Boundaries:** The first step is to teach the dog to stay completely off the flower and vegetable gardens and that is only allowed on the grass or other parts of the yard. Teach the dog "Off". Hold a treat in your hand, say "Off". Don't let the dog get the treat. The instant the dog stops struggling to get the treat reward the dog with a different treat. Repeat this exercise with food and with objects until the

dog can stop before contact when you say "Off". Clearly demarcate the forbidden areas with a short fence about a foot in height. A few small sticks with a length of string attached along the top is fine. The fence is not intended as a physical barrier but as a means of marking a boundary. Spend the day outside with a good book and watch the dog. Each time the dog gets close to the boundary, quietly warn it by saying "Off". If one paw goes over the line, say "oops" and put the dog inside. Whenever all four paws are firmly grounded on the correct side of the boundary immediately reward the dog. If the owner can invest a little time, all dogs quickly learn to keep off the garden.

**B) Entrapment:** Place one or two drops of chicken broth or bacon drippings on the lawn. Do some gardening, or work on a suntan, but watch the dog. The dog will eventually discover these spots and start to investigate. If the dog begins to scratch at the ground, immediately say "Dig in your pit". Run to the digging pit and entice the dog to dig as before and praise it as soon as it does so. Repeat the above, but this time leave the dog in the yard on its own and watch it from a window (family members can rotate watches). As soon as the dog makes nary a scratch, the person on watch can rap on the window and other family members can run outside to remind the dog of the correct behavior. After several repetitions, the dog quickly learns that it is no fun to dig anywhere else but in the digging pit.

\*Draft document prepared for the San Francisco SPCA by Dr. Ian Dunbar