



## OH MY GARDEN, OH MY SLIPPERS

Chewing and digging are normal behaviours of dogs. Dogs chew and dig for fun, to hide treasured possessions, as part of the elimination ritual, to relieve aching teeth or to improve jaw strength and occasionally because they are feeling anxious. When a dog chooses to dig up your favourite rose or chew your favourite slippers it seems quite normal for him, it is humans who think this is inappropriate. We must teach him what is appropriate and what is not. He needs to learn “the rules”. It would be almost impossible to stop this behaviour completely, however, here are some hints on how to improve chewing and digging behaviour or direct it towards something we feel is appropriate.

### **Chewing**

- It is easiest to start with puppies by directing them towards appropriate chew toys (Barrett, 1998). Provide many and varied toys and rawhide chews or pig’s ears for puppies and adult dogs. To encourage dogs to chew the appropriate toys fill or cover with food or play a game with the toy at first. Praise the dog for sniffing, licking or chewing these selected items.
- If you catch the dog chewing something inappropriate then correct the dog with a firm, deep voiced “no” and remove the object. Replace with a chew toy and praise the dog for chewing this. It might be worth spending some time watching the dog or puppy for an opportunity go through this process a number of times.
- Be consistent! Don’t let the dog chew a shoe one day then punish him for chewing a shoe the next.
- Deny access or fence off areas where the dog is doing damage or ensure that valuable objects are placed beyond temptation.
- If you punish your dog then the dog may learn not to do this behaviour when you are present but that it is OK when you are absent. “Booby Trapping” has the advantage that the aversive experience isn’t linked with you. You can “booby-trap” things you don’t want the dog to touch like clothes on the line with water-filled balloons or fabric with non-toxic bitter tasting or hot substances. Upside down mouse-traps or snappy trainers are good deterrents.
- Avoid punishing the behaviour, it is less effective than the other methods and may make an anxious dog worse.

### **Digging**

Provide a digging pit about the size of a sand pit and teach the dog that it is OK to dig in this place but not anywhere else in the garden ( Seksel, 1998b).

- “Booby Trap” the garden with air-filled balloons or mouse traps or snappy trainers just covered with soil.
- Correct the dog’s behaviour when you catch him in the act. Then take him to his “digging pit” and praise and reward for digging here.
- Place fences around inappropriate areas, especially newly tilled soil or freshly planted plants.
- Place dog droppings or deterrent spray in the areas you would prefer the dog doesn’t dig.
- Place chicken wire over the top of garden beds or just below the soil surface.
- Encourage digging in the “digging pit” by burying bones, toys, food etc in it and reward and praise the dog when he uses his pit.
- Provide shelter from the cold and heat, clean bedding and a wading pool in hot climates.

The information sheet *Dogs with Energy to Burn* contains some more helpful information.

If your dog continues this behaviour, make an appointment to see your vet. It is important that a physical cause for this behaviour is ruled out and the vet may discuss with you the possibility of a full behaviour assessment.