



DOGS DIG IT!

No doubt about it, dogs like dirt. "Terrier," in fact, comes from "terra" or "earth." So it's no wonder that putting a dog together with the lovely loose dirt of a planting bed often results in holes, uprooted vegetation, and hard feelings. Do you have to choose between your dog and your daffodils? Of course not. You can keep both with the addition of a digging pit to your landscape.

A digging pit provides an approved digging area, letting your dog satisfy his urges without destroying your yard. It can be as elaborate or as rustic as you like, as long as it suits some basic doggie desires.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

One of the reasons dogs, especially heavily coated dogs, dig is to have cool dirt under their bellies when they lie down. So locating your pit where it will be shaded, at least in the hottest part of the day, will increase its appeal. This can also help to solve the perennial gardener's problem of what to put in that corner of deep shade.

You'll also want to consider what's around your digging pit. Most dogs will manage to kick some sand out of the pit at least occasionally. Some plants would find this a welcome addition to their surroundings, but some might not be so pleased.

And, especially if you choose a below-ground dug-in style of digging pit, you don't want a location that will become waterlogged when you water the surrounding area. While dry sand doesn't adhere too well to dog fur and will mostly remain in the yard, wet sand can be tracked into the house in truly amazing quantities. So think dry when you're planning your pit.

CONSTRUCTION

First, the size. You'll want a pit about as wide as your dog is long and half again as long. These proportions generally work well to give the dog room to maneuver comfortably, yet keep the walls close enough so that most of the flying sand hits them and stays inside the pit.

The height of the sides will depend on if you're digging down below ground level to start your pit or simply dumping the sand on top of the earth. If you're not digging down, the sides will need to be at least as high as your dog is tall. Keep in mind that when you add sand, a foot deep is the absolute minimum, and more is better. So your dog will be standing a foot or more above ground level.

If you don't want walls that high, then dig in your pit. Excavate an area the size of your pit to the full digging depth - say, a foot and a half - and use only foot-high walls to help hold the sand in when the pit is filled.

Once you've decided on the location and dimensions, you'll need to decide on your construction materials. You need solid walls to hold the sand in, but wood, cinder blocks, retaining wall blocks, and all sorts of other things, can work.

If you have even basic woodworking skills, you can use 1" x 8" fence boards for the sides with 2" x 4"s placed inside each corner to nail the fence boards to. Three rounds of boards will give you a 24"-high wall. Leave an opening only one board high for the entry, fill with a foot of sand, and the sand will hold your box in place without even anchoring it to the ground. You can even paint flowers on your walls if you like.

Cinder blocks also work well. If you dig the pit below ground level, two rows of blocks will probably be sufficient. Lay them overlapping, brickwork style, and unless your dog is really rambunctious, you won't even have to secure them. For a higher cinder block wall, continue in the overlapping brickwork style, then pound rebar down through the stacked holes of the blocks and into the ground to hold them in place.

AND NOW FOR THE DOG

Once your digging pit is built and filled with a mixture of sand and loose dirt (about 3 parts sand to 1 part dirt), you have to convince your dog this is the one and only place to dig. It takes an investment of some time, but it isn't difficult.

Bury some things your dog will be happy to find in the pit. A couple of favorite toys and a variety of dry biscuits are good. Take your dog with you to the pit and make a big show of digging something up. Get excited, play with a toy you uncover, get your dog involved.

After a minute or two of play, bury the toy again while your dog watches. Scratch in the sand over the toy, encourage your dog to get it. A lot of dogs will dig where you're indicating, especially since they can smell the toys and biscuits. If yours does, praise extravagantly and play again when the toy is unearthed.

If your dog has been scolded for digging previously, it may take more encouragement to get her started while you're there watching. Keep encouraging her. Dig so that part of a biscuit is visible and urge her to take it. Praise any little pawing or scratching she does.

Once you've got the dog digging in the pit, keep him under supervision in the yard. If he should start to dig anywhere else, say "no," hurry to the digging pit with him, tell him "dig here, good dig here." Start digging with him if you have to. Praise when he digs.

If you keep your digging pit stocked with goodies, and are consistent in praising digging there and rejecting attempts at digging anywhere else, in anywhere from a day to a week, most dogs will be happily hopping into their digging pit whenever they feel the urge to excavate.

Your plants will be intact, your yard will be hole-free, and you and your dog will both be happier.

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