**Escaping from the Yard**

*Courtesy of Nevada Humane Society*

Dogs are naturally territorial and like to patrol familiar areas. For many, a trot around the edges of the yard, a walk or a trip to the park satisfies the urge to check out known places. However, some dogs feel the need to escape from their yards so that they can explore alone. Some dogs repeatedly escape or attempt to escape from their yard by jumping or climbing the fence, digging under the fence, opening a gate, chewing through their tether, or running through electronic fencing. Once they escape, some dogs may run away from home and explore, while others may curl up on the front porch or some other place near their home.

***What Causes Escape Behavior?***

*Fear.* Some dogs try to escape from their yards because they’re afraid. The dog’s fear may be triggered by something about the location itself, by unfamiliar people, by frightening sounds or even by bad weather, such as when it’s too hot, too cold, raining or about to storm.

*Roaming/Exploration.* A dog might try to escape from his yard simply because he enjoys leaving his property to roam and explore.

*Seeking Social Contact*. Dogs are social creatures, and some dogs escape from their yard to seek out contact with people or other dogs.

*Searching for a Mate*. An unneutered or unspayed dog might escape from his or her yard to find potential mates. Male dogs are more likely to escape for this reason than females, but all unaltered dogs can attempt escape to look for mates.

***Other Behavior Problems to Rule Out***

*Separation Anxiety*. If a dog only tries to escape from his yard because he’s left alone—not because he’s lonely but because being separated from his owners makes him nervous—the underlying problem is separation anxiety, and escape is simply a symptom. This kind of escape behavior is usually accompanied by one or more other symptoms of separation anxiety such as whining, howling, pacing, trembling, and exaggerated destruction of barriers and other objects. Treatment for separation anxiety-induced escape behavior does not involve steps to secure the property and must instead concentrate entirely on treatment of the underlying anxiety.

***What to Do If Your Dog Is an Escape Artist***

Put identification on your dog’s collar that includes your phone number. Microchipping your dog is also a good idea so that animal shelters can easily identify him and return him to you.

Regardless of *why* your dog tries to escape, the first thing to do is figure out *how* he’s escaping. You need to make sure you’re containing him properly.

* Fencing should be secure and high enough to prevent your dog from jumping over it. If your dog has already mastered the art of climbing your fence, you’ll need to cover the inside of the fence with a smooth surface such as plywood or flat, vertical boards so that you can eliminate “toe holds” where your dog can put his feet in order to climb over the fence.
* Fill in any gaps where your dog may squeeze through the fence—pay close attention to corners where your fencing connects to a building and at gates—and fill in gaps between the bottom of your fence and the ground where your dog could dig out. If your dog attempts to dig under the fence, a reliable deterrent is to bury chicken wire under the ground at the base of your fence. Roll the sharp edges of the chicken wire inward, and place large rocks over the dirt along the edge the fence. Another option is to lay chain-link fencing on the ground.
* If your dog can jump incredible heights, consider installing an electronic fence in addition to your physical fence. A relatively sure deterrent is to build a covered kennel area inside your yard.
* If your dog has learned to run through an electronic fence, add a physical fence as well.
* If your dog can open gates, keep them padlocked. If your children sometimes forget to close gates behind them, install a quick, self-closing system. A local hardware store or contractor can help with these projects.
* If you have a fence your dog can see through, blocking his view of the outside world may help reduce or eliminate his urge to escape.

***If Your Dog Escapes Because He’s Fearful***

If your dog has had an unpleasant experience while in your yard, he may try to escape because he’s become afraid to be in the yard. Fear-producing experiences for a dog can include seeing a scary stranger enter the area, seeing or hearing an aggressive dog in a nearby yard, experiencing punishment from a family member, hearing a loud or startling noise or receiving a shock from an electronic fence. These things can create a desperate need to escape in some dogs, even if the unpleasant experience happened in the past. Dogs who are afraid of their yards might escape and then stay nearby, still on their property (usually just outside the front door), although some fearful dogs may run away after escaping.

Some dogs will only try to escape from their yards during bad weather (high winds, hail or thunderstorms, for example). These dogs may need special treatment to overcome thunderstorm phobia. If you think your dog might try to escape from your yard because he’s afraid, there are some things you can do to help him:

* Every time your dog is in the yard, make sure good things happen for him. These things can include play, treats, attention from you, petting, chasing squirrels, etc. Over time (maybe a few weeks or months), your dog should start to look excited and happy whenever he goes into the yard. Some dogs may act perfectly fine when their owners are outside with them but then show fear when they are outside alone. If you think that your dog may be fearful when you aren’t with him, you must teach him that the yard is pleasant even when you aren’t there. Do this by giving him a toy to play with and then going in the house, waiting a few moments and then coming back outside with treats. Work to gradually extend the amount of time that he can be alone first by seconds and then minutes, increasing the time only as you see he doesn’t show fear.
* It’s very important to ensure that your dog has no further unpleasant experiences in the yard. Until he’s relaxed and happy there, avoid leaving him unsupervised. You need to watch him carefully, to make sure that he doesn’t become frightened and try to escape again.
* If you can identify the exact event that triggered your dog’s fear, try to eliminate the possibility of that thing happening in the future. For instance, if you live next door to an aggressive, frightening dog, build an interior fence as a buffer zone. If a shock from your electronic fence frightened your dog, install a physical fence and don’t put the electronic fence collar on your dog.

***Medications May Help***

Sometimes, a dog may feel so frightened or panicked in his yard that he’s incapable of spending any amount of time there—even when you’re with him. If you’ve tried the tips above and still have trouble changing your dog’s fearful behavior in the yard, consider asking your veterinarian about medication options.

There are numerous anti-anxiety medications available for dogs with fear-related behavior problems. They fall into two main categories: (1) short-acting drugs that are administered as needed and (2) drugs that are administered daily and need to build up in a dog’s system before they work to relieve anxiety. Depending on the severity and nature of your dog’s fearful behavior, one or both kinds of drugs, in conjunction with training, might help your dog overcome his fear.

***Always consult with your veterinarian or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist before giving your dog any type of medication for a behavior problem.***

**What NOT to Do**

* Do not force your dog to confront his fear. Instead, if your dog offers confident behavior on his own, like venturing out into the yard for a few minutes, praise him enthusiastically and reward him with a few tasty treats.
* Do not scold or physically punish your dog for being afraid. If you do, you’ll just worsen his anxiety and fear.
* Do not constantly reassure or “coddle” your fearful dog. You do want him to look to you for safety and security, but you don’t want him to misinterpret your attempts to soothe him. When your dog seems afraid, if you repeatedly pick him up or start chanting, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” you may convince him that *you’re* anxious and frightened, too! Instead, if you notice that your dog is displaying fearful behavior, just stay calm and quiet. Try to remove the thing that’s frightening him or remove him from the frightening situation. If you and your dog go out into your yard together and he starts to shake, tuck his tail or whine, take him back inside.

***If Your Dog Escapes to Explore and Roam***

If your dog escapes from your yard to roam, you may have difficulty discouraging his behavior because, for him, it’s very rewarding. Most dogs naturally love to run around and explore their neighborhoods.

* If you have an intact male dog, getting him neutered will reduce his desire to roam.
* Increased exercise and play opportunities may help curb your dog’s desire to roam. If you exercise your dog well so that he’s tired, and you provide plenty of fun and interesting things for him to enjoy in his yard (like chew bones and toys), he’ll be much less likely to feel the need to escape and entertain himself out in the world.
* If you punish your dog for trying to escape from your yard, you may frighten him—which could *increase* his desire to run away. Most pet supply resources carry remote punishers, such as air horns, loud alarms or citronella spray collars, but correct use of these punishers can very be difficult. You must know exactly how and when to apply them in order to effectively change your dog’s behavior and avoid upsetting him. If you decide to try using a remote punisher to discourage your dog’s roaming behavior, contact a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or Associate CAAB), a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB) or an experienced Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) for help using the device properly.

***If Your Dog Escapes Because He’s Lonely***

Dogs kept in backyards tend to receive less human contact than those kept indoors as part of the family. When they don’t get enough social interaction, many dogs seek contact with people or other dogs by escaping from their yards. If your dog spends a lot of time outside alone (more than two or three hours a day), he may develop a habit of escaping to find some company and relieve his loneliness. Spending more time with your dog and finding ways to let him play with dog buddies will help a great deal. If your dog gets plenty of social interaction in general, he’s less likely to feel the need to seek it out by escaping from your yard. Human attention should be scheduled on a daily basis. You can groom your dog, go for walks or runs together, play with toys together, take fun obedience classes, take time out for a good snuggle, etc. Plan to do things with your dog that you’ll both enjoy. If your dog likes other dogs and seems to enjoy contact with them, a daily trip to an off-leash dog park might be a good idea. You can also try arranging “play dates” with your friends’ or neighbors’ friendly dogs. Contact a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) for group or private classes that can give you and your dog lots of great skills to learn and games to play together.

Adding a new dog to your household might satisfy your dog’s desire to spend time with his own species, but you should choose this option only if you already wanted a second dog. In other words, don’t get another dog just as a possible solution to your current dog’s behavior problem. If you get a new canine roommate for your dog and they *both* spend lots of time in the yard, you may end up with *two* escape artists!

***If Your Dog Escapes to Find a Mate***

Both intact male and female dogs tend to escape from yards to search for mates. If possible, neuter your male dog. Spay your female dog—or at least keep her indoors whenever she’s in heat. Spaying and neutering doesn’t always stop escape behavior, but it does eliminate or reduce any sexual motivation for escape. If your dog doesn’t feel the urge to find a mate, he may not feel the urge to escape from your yard at all. Spaying or neutering your dog has other benefits, too! You won’t contribute to the pet overpopulation crisis, and spay/neuter helps prevent serious medical problems, such as mammary and testicular cancers.

