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Escaping the Yard

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A common dilemma among pet owners is the canine escape artist. Aside from the obvious risk of losing one's valued companion, the dog could get into trouble when out on its own. It could injure someone, get into a dog fight, kill livestock, or damage property. Current legislation is making owners increasingly liable for the actions of their pets, so the only prudent step is to make certain that Fido cannot roam freely.

The first step in finding a solution is to analyze the motivation. Is the dog running away from something, such as thunder, hail, an alarm, a feared animal or person, boredom or loneliness? Perhaps the dog is trying to get to something. For example, it may want to play with nearby dogs or children, chase a rabbit or cat, find its owner, or lay on the front porch in the shade.

It is also important to know how the dog is getting out. Is it breaking or chewing through its tie-out line. If there is a fence, is the gate latch faulty? Could there be a hole or gap in or under the fence. Does the dog leap, climb over, crawl under, or chew through the fence? Knowing the method of escape is crucial in taking steps to make the yard escape-proof.

Tying the dog outside when no one is home is not recommended. The line can get caught on something, trapping or strangling the dog, and the animal is a trapped victim to the elements, strangers, and other animals. This makes tying-out a passive form of attack training, since anytime the animal is afraid, the fight-or-flight instincts take over, and the tied animal has only the former choice.

If there is no fence, create a puppy-proofed area within the home, using a gate and no-chew sprays, where the animal can stay when no one is there. The dog will not be able to escape, can not be stolen, will feel more secure and, therefore, will be a calmer pet. When the owner is home, the dog could be tied out for exercise on a trolley cable. It uses a chew-proof cable which travels back and forth on

another cable, similar to a clothes line, giving the dog much more safe "freedom".

Check the fence and gate thoroughly and make needed repairs. If the dog is exiting under the fence, the bottom could be reinforced with cement blocks or staple chicken wire to the bottom of the fence and extended inward, to make a dig-proof extension. If the dog is getting out over the top, one could add an extension on the inside upper edge. Attach "L" shaped shelf brackets along the top and lay chicken wire, to make an unobtrusive inward "shelf" which will discourage escape.

One can install a "Fido-shock" wire on the fence which will give the canine a small jolt when touched. The owner must know how the dog is getting out in order to position the wire on the fence; on the bottom, if it digs out, in the middle if it chews out, and on the top if it climbs over. Check first to see if there is an ordinance prohibiting this type of device in your municipality. Do not use electricity to correct young puppies or toy dogs.

Make the fence scary to the dog. If it digs or gets too close, toss a can filled with some pebbles or coins near the dog to startle it. Squirt it with the hose, or toss a bean bag at it as it attempts to escape. Tie balloons on the fence and pop one if the dog goes near it. He'll soon learn to stay away from that area. Hide outside the fence and practice guerrilla warfare as the pet emerges from the yard. The key is to make this inappropriate behavior instantly and consistently unpleasant or frightening. Remember, these steps may be saving the dog's life, so do whatever it takes to get the job done.

There are also various items which the dog could wear to make escape unlikely. One is a "jump restraint harness", which permits the dog to walk around, climb stairs, and lie down. However, Fido will not be able to thrust his hind legs backwards far enough to "take off". The dog could wear a small board, dangling from a short chain from the collar,

like a pendant. This would make jumping or digging out difficult. Suit the size of this object to the dog.

The dog could also trail an empty plastic milk bottle on a chain. The average dog will not jump if it is attached to an object such as this. However, make certain that the chain is longer than the fence is high. Should the dog decide to jump, even though it has a "caboose", the bottle may catch on the top of the fence. The dog should have enough chain to land safely and not be hung from the fence.

A popular and effective, but expensive, choice is an electric fence. A wire is buried along the property line, and the dog wears an electric transmitter/receiver collar. When Fido goes too near the "fence", a warning sound is produced. If the dog goes closer to the line, it will get a shock, which the owner can adjust. If it's set too low, the dog may escape, and if it's set too high the dog may get a burn on its neck.

The owner could also train the dog to stay on its own property. It is best to start when the dog is young and has never had the chance to run away. The owner should make the yard a pleasant place to be and make leaving the yard consistently unpleasant. This can be done using a long line and toss items or sound alarms, such as the "Magic Fence". This training process will be more effective if the dog knows exactly where its boundaries are. Install a string on stakes or lay a scent line (spray or sprinkle a distinctive chemical along the property line) and warn, then promptly correct the dog when it crosses the line.

Positive alternatives should be the primary choice, whenever possible. Install a dog door. There are many types available, including panels which slip easily into sliding glass doors. The dog will be able to go in and out as it pleases. This will make it more content, safer, and less of a pest.

Many owners put the dog out because it is not housebroken or it is destructive. This seems easier than training the pet to avoiding these mistakes. However, confinement in the yard causes a new set of problems to surface. Training may require more effort, but it results in a much nicer pet.

Give the dog a 20-minute aerobics session before leaving for the day. Play fetch, tag, or go for a run. This will vent a lot of the stress and energy which is driving the dog to escape. Fido may then be content to sleep the rest of the day while the owner is

gone. Dogs do need a lot more sleep than humans.

Get a playmate for the dog. Instead of being so anxious, bored and lonely that it wants to run away from home, it could be spending the long days romping and playing with a pal. Owning two dogs is less trouble and more fun than owning one, especially if the family is away from home a lot. The pet will have a healthier, happier, more normal canine existence.

If the family pet is an escape artist, the owner should put on a thinking cap or consult a trainer. There are many possible solutions, but the owner will want to pick the one that is best suited to one's circumstances and to the pet's temperament.