

Dr. Ruth MacPete, DVM

Ruth has more than 15 years of experience in the veterinary industry as a companion animal veterinarian in private practice. Along with being a writer and media personality, she is also a founding member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team.

The other day I had some friends tell me they were afraid they would have to get rid of their dog because he was digging under their fence and constantly escaping. Fortunately, he didn't go far and usually just ended up in their neighbor's yard, but my friends were concerned that one day he would wander and get lost, or worse, get hit by a car. They loved their dog and they didn't want to part with him, but they were frustrated that they couldn't provide a safe environment for him.

Having an "escape artist" as a pet can be a challenging problem to solve. While preventing your pet from escaping is important and needs to be addressed right away, it is equally important to determine why your dog is trying to escape in the first place. What is your dog's motivation for digging out of your yard or leaping over your fence? Is there something he's afraid of? Does he always escape whenever there is a storm or when the gardener comes? Is your dog intact and interested in finding a mate? Does your dog have enough to do or is he bored? Does your dog suffer from separation anxiety and escape the yard in order to be reunited with you? Try to pay attention to the circumstances when your dog escapes in order to identify the underlying motivations and ultimately solve the digging problem.

- If you discover that your pet has a phobia, you can either eliminate the situation inciting the phobia, if possible, or attempt to correct the behavioral component.
- If your dog is intact and escapes to find a mate, he should be neutered. Intact animals are likely to roam in search of mates. Sadly this is why so many pets are hit by cars or end up in shelters.
- Neutering your pet is not only the responsible

thing for pet owners to do because of pet overpopulation, but it can also save your pet's life and may be the answer to your run-away problem.

- If your pet is after the neighbor's garbage you could ask your neighbor to get a pet-proof garbage receptacle to remove the temptation to escape.
- If your pet is left outdoors for long periods of time they may become bored. Be sure to give your pet interactive toys and keep them indoors with you as much as possible.
- Lastly if your dog is digging to escape and be reunited with you, he may be suffering from separation anxiety. Remember that dogs are pack animals and prefer to be with other animals or people. Your dog may become very anxious when left alone. This behavioral problem can be quite complex and challenging and requires the help of your veterinarian and/or a veterinary behaviorist. Fortunately, there are training techniques and medications available to help.

In the meantime if your pet is digging his way out of your yard, you can reinforce your fence by ensuring that it extends beneath ground level. This makes it more difficult for pets to dig out. You can also look into electronic fencing. While these measures help, to solve the underlying problem, you will need to determine why your pet is trying to escape. Ask your veterinarian for help if your pet is suffering from a behavioral problem such as separation anxiety, a phobia, or boredom.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian – they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.