



Rutland Dog Training

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Growling by Adam Beral

Hello Adam. I have a three year old golden retriever called Max. He is a very playful dog, however when he gets something in his mouth, which is nearly always as he is forever picking different objects up (bottles, kitchen roll and even woodchip!) he always growls whenever we try to remove the object, he has even attempted a warning bite before. He just chews the items up. He pulls plants up from the garden and runs off with garden ornaments. Help me what can I do?

The most important thing to stress in this case is that you or anyone in your family should not put yourself in a position where you may get bitten. The advice given may not work for all individuals, and if you are in any doubt you need to seek practical guidance from a dog behaviour expert. In the meantime, take away any items he is highly likely to guard. Consider spraying items such as garden ornaments with specially formulated 'bitter sprays' that taste so horrible most dogs won't touch any item it is sprayed on.

To begin with, it is important to lay down a few ground rules about how to deal with the problem. Make sure that Max receives no reinforcement for stealing items. Remember, for a lot of dogs any attention from you is a reward in itself, even unpleasant attention.

If it is possible to interrupt Max in the act of stealing, that is quite different. A startling noise as he goes to grab a garden ornament may stop him just long enough for you to get his attention on you for a game with one of his toys. This gives you something to praise him for and removes all attention from the stealing behaviour.

It then becomes necessary to teach Max a command to relinquish items when you ask. The command I tend to use is 'leave', but choose a word that doesn't already mean anything to Max. Play a game with him using a toy that you can both get a comfortable grip on. Alternatively play fetch with Max on a light lead. After a short while, produce a really high value treat (something very smelly and tasty he doesn't usually have). As he drops the toy in favour of the treat, give your command to 'leave' and allow him to have the treat as a reward.

You may need to work very slowly with this treatment, and never get to a stage where you do not feel comfortable. Remember that your safety is paramount, and it may be necessary to involve an expert who can read Max's signals very carefully to ensure his behaviour does not escalate to a bite.

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