

Owning an Aussie Without a Yard

I've come across several articles and books that say that it is essential to have a fenced yard in order to have a dog as active as the typical Australian Shepherd. Having successfully had Aussie companions for several years in an urban environment with practically no yard, let alone a fence, I've found that it can be done. Provided you're not constantly tripping over each other, a small house, apartment, condo, or townhouse can do just fine. I will even claim that there are advantages to not having a yard! But you will need to make an extra, continuing commitment to your relationship with your dog to make it work. This article will help you decide whether it is realistic for you to own an Aussie if you don't have a yard.

Keep in mind that having a fenced area is not a replacement for spending time with your dog nor does it mean that he will be perfectly safe or that he'll get the amount of exercise he needs. It does, however, tend to make things more convenient.

Please consult other sources of information to help you decide if the Australian Shepherd is the right breed for you.

Elimination, Walks, and Other Exercise

If you don't have a fenced yard it will be necessary for you to walk your dog to exercise him and for elimination. If you have a young puppy, you can count on having to take him out quite frequently: first thing in the morning, last thing at night, shortly after a drink of water, and sometimes in the middle of the night. Until your puppy is housebroken, I highly recommend finding an eating/drinking/elimination schedule that works for

you and sticking to it religiously. A more mature dog can have a more flexible schedule and will need fewer "bathroom walks", but will need more "exercise walks". If your dog has an upset tummy, you can expect to have to take him out more often.

Unless you have an extremely laid back Aussie, you will have to find a safe place where he can run and play to get additional exercise and burn off energy. Excess energy not used up in play may be released as destructive behaviour, so you won't be able to skip here, no matter what the weather is like. How often this exercise is needed depends on the particular Aussie. Some might make do with a bare minimum of a couple of hours per week, others might require a minimum of 20-60 minutes per day.

To provide some concrete numbers, my Aussie and I walk a minimum of two miles every day. In addition, once or twice every week we'll go for a 4 - 10 mile walk or strenuous hike and a few times each week we'll have a vigorous 30-60 minute long fetch session. I'll confess that when the weather isn't nice our level of activity tends to be reduced.

In my opinion, if the following statements describe you, you and your Aussie can live happily ever after without a yard:

1. I am a fairly active person and enjoy walking and other outdoor activities.
2. I will be comfortable walking in my neighbourhood, even late at night.
3. I will be able to pick up after my dog every time.

4. I will be able to take my dog somewhere safe where he can run.

Disadvantages of Not Having a Fenced Yard

The single biggest disadvantage of not having a fenced yard is that you must go for walks even when you don't feel like it, such as when the weather's miserable or you're not feeling well. If there is more than one family member taking care of the dog, sharing this responsibility can make this less unpleasant.

Another disadvantage is that a safe off-leash area for running and play may not be conveniently close. Many urban areas have designated dog parks or areas where it is safe for your dog to run and play with other dogs, although it may be necessary to jump in the car. If you have an unsprayed female, you may need to be cautious.

If you have a young puppy, there are special considerations. Until your puppy has been fully vaccinated, you will have to keep him away from other dogs and places where other dogs relieve themselves. You will either need a private area outside, even a very small one, that will be safe for this purpose or you will have to set up a location indoors. Please refer to a book, such as "The Art of Raising a Puppy" by the Monks of New Skete for details.

Finally, having more than one dog may be too difficult. Walking more than one dog at a time or taking your dogs on separate walks may require too much time and effort. Keeping an eye on more than one dog in a off-leash area is more difficult.

Advantages of Not Having a Fenced Yard

Some positive aspects result when you don't have a fenced yard. You and your dog may

well spend more time together and you will likely spend more time walking him. Consequently:

* it may be easier to socialize our dog with other people and dogs since you will probably have more opportunities to meet them;

* your dog is likely to have better leash manners because he spends more time on leash and

*don't forget that you will benefit: you're exercising while you're walking your dog, meeting more of your neighbours, keeping an eye on what's going on in your neighbourhood, etc.

Also there may be disadvantages to having a fenced yard, mostly arising from the strong temptation to leave him unsupervised. A fenced yard isn't necessarily a safe place to leave your dog unattended:

*your dog can escape if a gate is left open, if he jumps over the fence, or if he digs under it;

*dogs have been stolen from yards;

*your dog may bite a visitor or trespasser, leaving you legally responsible;

*dogs have been poisoned in their yards or harassed by passersby and

*your dog's barking might create a disturbance that annoys your neighbours.

Concluding Tips

If you're convinced that you and your Aussie can live happily without a fenced yard, you know that you'll be spending time outdoors

several times daily. Here are a few concluding tips to consider:

*be responsible and always pick up after your dog (I recommend self-closing sandwich size plastic bags);

*leaving your dog tied up outside while unsupervised has all the disadvantages of leaving him unsupervised in a yard, with a greater chance of getting loose or biting someone, so don't do it;

*always keep your dog on a leash unless you're certain it's safe and your dog won't get into any trouble;

*watch what your dog picks up and puts in his mouth;

*on a dark and stormy night, you'll be glad that you've taught your dog to do his business on command and

* if you live in a cold or wet climate you'll be glad you invested in good-quality outdoor clothing.

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