



Container Searches

Container searches in scent work are an element where the dog must locate and indicate a target odor hidden inside one of many containers, which are often identical. Challenges may include working with variable odor strength, ignoring distractions, and discriminating between the target odor and other scents, requiring dogs to perform a "selection" task rather than a "hunting" task. Success relies on proper training to help dogs avoid common issues like damaging containers or becoming overwhelmed by the choice. Consistency in early training will help create clear goals and help your dog find the target odor.

How container searches work

The dog must find the single container holding the target odor and alert the handler. Multiple containers are placed in a designated search area. They are typically the same type but don't have to be identical (e.g., a line of five cardboard boxes, buckets, food storage containers, etc).

Unlike a hunting search, a container search is a selection exercise, forcing the dog to choose the correct container from the available options.

Containers present unique challenges, such as variable odor strength and the need for the dog to ignore distractions and avoid destroying or disturbing the search area.

You can use a wide variety of household items as well. The key is that they must allow some odor to escape (air-tight containers won't work). In competition, standard trial containers are typically cardboard and plastic.

Some of the common containers utilized are:

- Cardboard boxes (typically used in most trial venues)
- Plastic bins, plastic storage boxes, mugs, shaker bottles, or kitchen containers
- Metal tins, toolboxes, pencil cases
- Luggage, backpacks, shopping bags
- Flower pots, buckets, food containers
- Briefcases, shoes, or purses

What makes containers challenging

When doing container searches the dog must choose the right one rather than just hunt for the target odor, which can increase performance pressure on the search team. It can also lead to frustration in an inexperienced dog if there are too many choices. And while containers offer the most controlled search setting we can create for our dogs, they don't come without their own set of challenges.

The amount of odor escaping from a container can vary depending on the container's material, where it is placed, and the amount of time it is allowed to set before the search. Starting with containers with more available odor will help the dog learn the game. Plastic storage containers that are fully closed do not make odor as available to the dog as cardboard boxes do. Even if a cardboard box is closed it still allows air to pass through the seams making odor more available to the dog. The dogs are also more drawn to the boxes if they are started on boxes, as many programs do, because they have paired rewards and play with the find. Dogs love patterns and predictability and early exposure and clear criteria make boxes very valuable.

A potential challenge with containers, cardboard or plastic, is odor can sometimes stick on adjacent containers, leading to potential false alerts by the dog. Odor is dynamic and moves with air currents; it is not fully contained within the box. Dogs may need to work the area *around* the containers to follow the scent cone back to the source.

Handlers should allow their dogs this space and not demand they stay glued to the containers. It is important in the early introduction stage to reward as close to odor as possible to avoid reinforcing fringe alert behavior.

Contamination can also be a problem with containers. Unlike with an interior search with several hides hidden within the search area, containers involve ten or more containers placed in the search area for the dog to search. And if you are not careful with your preparation and set up you risk contaminating ALL the containers when you set up your search.

Another issue that I see quite a bit in beginning dogs is box smashing. Many dogs have a past history with shredding boxes and paper and coupled with the reward in a box and being new to the search, oftentimes dogs will smash or try to chew on boxes, largely because they are in a high state of arousal. This is another reason to be careful with your practices and criteria in the early phases of container work.

Remember, early exposure with consistent criteria is the foundation for building a good search team. Early in your training it is a good point to incorporate very mild distractions into the training, as distractions are ever present and your dog will have to learn to ignore them.

Training and Setup

When setting up your training plan there are a few things to keep in mind that will help your dog learn the rules of the game.

- Begin with only one container that has the hidden odor and reward, making it very easy for the dog to be successful. As they start to show understanding of the exercise, you can gradually add more cold containers.
- To prevent the dog from getting stuck in a pattern, regularly change the type, size, shape, and height of the containers used. Introduce novel objects, such as different types of boxes, pails, or even cinder blocks, to ensure they learn to search for the *odor*, not a specific container. This ensures the dog can adapt to different materials and odor release rates.
- Establish a consistent pre-search routine
 - Use a search cue to let your dog know it's time to start sniffing
 - Consider using a special search harness to help your dog know what they are getting ready to do
 - Have a pre-search focus exercise to get your dog focused for the search
- End the search session while the dog is still excited and interested. A few short, successful searches are better than one long, exhausting one.
- Reward successes to build the dog's drive and enjoyment of the exercise. With a reward the dog likes!
- If the dog disengages, try to solve the problem and come back to it later.
- Practice in various environments, including outdoors, to accustom the dog to changing airflow, weather conditions, and natural distractions.
- Avoid giving your dog too much direction, running with a tight leash), or pulling the dog off of scent. Move with your dog and maintain a loose leash, allowing them the freedom to follow the scent plume and work the area naturally. Let the search be dog-driven. Indicating a container without the scent is often a result of pressure and/or a lack of confidence.
- Don't reward the dog for fringing or giving false alerts. This is a common issue, often caused by the dog cueing off the handler's movements or the handler not trusting the dog's nose and rewarding too soon and not close to the source.
- Get in the habit of recording your training sessions to review adjustments to make as well as using a journal or an app to track each session's details. This is very helpful information to be able to revisit when tracking your progress.
- Mark all the hot items with what they contained and store them separately from the cold training items.
- **Make sure to keep the game fun!** Container searches can be less exciting for some dogs compared to searching an entire room. Keeping training sessions fun, using high-value rewards, and ending on a positive note with praise and play are crucial for maintaining the dog's enthusiasm.
- Use a high value reward that the dog finds value in. All treats are not created equal. The reward for finding odor must be something your dog absolutely loves and that they only get during scent work. Think

smelly, desirable food treats (cheese, meat, etc.) or a favorite tug toy they can play with immediately after the find.

- Make it a party! Offer a generous amount of treats or a play session immediately at source. The dog should associate the act of finding the odor with a celebration.
- In early training let the dog self-reward. Use open containers with the food or toy readily accessible, allowing the dog to get their reward on their own instead of from you. This builds a positive association between the odor and the reward.

Typical Container Setups

- Containers in numbers that coincide with your dog's current skill level are arranged in rows, U-shapes, or circles
 - Typically with 12"–36" inches of spacing between each
 - Make sure to space them apart enough to allow the dog to work around each container without difficulty
- Levels & Complexity (check each individual scent venue for exact numbers, layouts, and allotted search times before each trial as rules are frequently updated)
 - AKC
 - Novice: 10 boxes, 1 hide, 2-minute limit
 - Advanced: 15 containers, 2 hides, 2-minute limit
 - Master: 20 containers, 1–3 hidden, 3-minute limit
 - UKC
 - Novice: 12 containers in a straight line. No known distractions.
 - Advanced: Number of containers increases. Distractions may be added.
 - Superior/Master/Elite: Up to 24 containers. Higher levels incorporate multiple hides, food or toy distractions, and more complex, challenging, or non-traditional containers
 - CPE
 - Level 1 (Novice):
 - Odors: Birch only
 - Setup: Generally 10–12 containers (typically cardboard boxes)
 - Hides: One hide
 - Distractions: None
 - Level 2:
 - Odors: Birch and/or Anise
 - Hides: One or two hides
 - Distractions: May include one non-food distraction (e.g., a toy or empty container)
 - Level 3:
 - Odors: Birch, Anise, and/or Clove
 - Hides: Typically one to three hides
 - Distractions: Up to two non-food distractions
 - Level 5 (Championship/CH):
 - Odors: Birch, Anise, Clove, and/or Cypress
 - Hides: Multiple hides (unknown exact count, usually varies by judge)
 - Distractions: Multiple non-food distractions. Handlers may also be allowed to enter two dogs at this level
 - Level C (Excellence/EX):
 - Odors: All previous odors plus Vetiver
 - Complexity: The highest level of difficulty, often involving "blank" areas (searches with no hides) or complex container arrangements
 - NACSW
 - NW1 (Nose Work 1)

- Containers: Identical cardboard boxes of any shape or size (e.g., mailers, plastic shoe boxes)
- Odor: Birch
- Hides: Typically 1 hide in the container search
- Distractions: None at this level
- Setup: Generally 10 containers, often in two rows of five, but this may vary
- Goal: The dog must seek out the exact source of the odor, with the handler correctly identifying the alert
- NW2 (Nose Work 2)
 - Containers: Various types (metal cans, plastic bins, cardboard boxes, luggage, fabric items)
 - Odors: Birch and/or Anise
 - Hides: Multiple hides may be present in one environment
 - Distractions: Food and toy distractions are introduced (e.g., 4 distractions in one container search: 1 toy, 3 food items)
 - Challenge: The team must work through more challenging, less accessible hides and longer, larger searches
- NW3 (Nose Work 3)
 - Containers: All types, including more challenging items (luggage, varied boxes, etc.)
 - Odors: Birch, Anise, Clove, and/or Cypress
 - Hides: 0 to 3 hides. A "blank" search (no odor) is possible
 - Distractions: Distractors are used at the Certifying Official's discretion, generally more challenging than NW2
 - Challenge: High variability in odor, requiring the dog to distinguish true source from, for example, a blank search
- Elite Division
 - Containers: Any acceptable containers from NW2 and NW3, including luggage and, more commonly, fabric-type containers
 - Distractions: Can include any type of distractor, including food, toys, and other novel items