

Improving the outdoor environment for cats

Making alterations to the outdoor environment available to your cat has several benefits:

- It increases the space available to your cat[s].
- It reduces competition for resources such as latrines and resting places within the home.
- It enables the cat to successfully maintain the garden as territory.

Cats control access to their territory using scent marks and by watching and threatening their enemies from vantage points. The garden must therefore be filled with hiding and climbing places as well as posts for scratching. This will also tend to reduce undesirable scratching that is carried out indoors.

Providing outdoor toilets

House-soiling problems tend to be worse in the winter, which is probably because outdoor latrines become difficult or unappealing for the cat to use. Hard, frozen ground is difficult to dig and water logged heavy soil is messy and unpleasant for the cat. Remember that cats are evolved from desert living ancestors.

Outdoor toilets reduce your cat's need to have an indoor litter tray or can help to reduce the number of indoor litter trays needed in a multi-cat household. They can be constructed easily to make them low-maintenance and available for the cat to use all year round.

- Find a suitable location for the latrine at the edge of the garden, obscured by flowerbeds and bushes to give the cat some privacy.
- Dig a hole that is approximately 60-90 cm deep, and 60-90cm square.
- Fill the bottom 2/3 of the hole with pea-sized gravel, for good drainage.
- Top up the hole with soft, white sand. Use playground quality sand and not the orange type used for building [known as sharp sand].
- Once your cat is using the latrine regularly you can scatter a little earth over the top to disguise it.
- Use a litter scoop to remove any faeces as you would with a conventional indoor tray.
- Dig out and replace the sand every few months to refresh the latrine.

Sand latrines do not get water-logged, or frozen and they give the cat an easily accessible toilet close to the house. Some cats cannot find a proper latrine in their own garden and have to go several houses away to find a suitable location. Apart from increasing the probability of a house-soiling problem if that latrine ceases to be available, it also tends to annoy neighbours.

Scratching places

Outdoor scratching places should be provided at the edge of the garden so that the cat can control access to its territory. These are simply made from softwood posts which have been rubbed against existing scratching places to pick up claw marking odours. The surface is scratched with a wire brush to simulate scratch marks, as this often attracts further scratching.

Hiding places and vantage points

Your cat needs some easily-defended vantage points in the garden where it can rest and observe other cats. There are many ways to do this:

- Fix shelves to fences and walls outside.
- Put wooden platforms into trees.
- Clear a shelf for the cat to sit on by a window in a garden shed.

The most important aspect of these places is that they must be set up to face away from the house and into the garden. In this way they do not allow other cats to use them to observe the house or cat flap. Block the view of the house using the natural arrangement of trees and shrubs in the garden, enhanced with planters and other features.

If your cat is hesitant to go out and hangs around the cat flap for long periods, or often rushes in as if being pursued, then it is helpful to place a few hiding places close to the exit of the cat flap. For example, position a few planters outside so that, if chased, your cat may hide rather than run inside. This reduces the tendency to spray around the inside of the cat flap. It also means that your cat can sneak out into the garden without being watched by other cats. However, you may have to make other arrangements if you have a local feline despot or intact tomcat, as these cats may lurk right outside the cat door waiting to attack your cat.

If your garden is largely open space with no planted borders, this can prove difficult for cats. Unless the area is devoid of any form of threat, they find traversing large open spaces quite intimidating. If possible try to provide plenty of shrubs, trees and planters that break up open spaces and provide secluded walkways at the edge of the garden for the cat to use.

Blocking access by other cats

Mostly cats are not concerned when other cats traverse their territory because it is normal for this to happen. Problems arise when other cats lurk in the garden, using their own vantage points to observe and threaten your cat either in its own home or when it tries to enter the garden.

Guidance on how to deal with this in the home is included on a separate handout about improving the indoor environment for cats, but it is also possible to modify the garden to deter other cats.

Steps to take:

Identify all vantage points other cats use to observe your cat in the home and garden.

Block the view from these places: Plant shrubs or place planters and other obstacles to obstruct the view. For example, trellis fence can be erected at the top of a wall to stop cats from watching from a neighbour's garage or shed roof.

Make vantage points uncomfortable for other cats to use: Knock long [8-10 cm], flat-headed nails into the top of wooden fences or posts, spaced about 4-6 cm apart to stop cats sitting there. They will still be able to walk along and stand, but not be able to lurk and threaten. Alternatively fix pieces of spiky plastic doormat or commercially available intruder deterrent plastic spikes onto fences, posts and other places where cats sit.

Do not use broken glass or other hazardous deterrents, as they may injure cats very badly.

