

# Resolving Neighbor Disputes

## Addressing Common Concerns about Outdoor Cats

The list below includes most of the common concerns that may come up around feral cats and Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR). A variety of solutions are offered for each issue. The solutions are often most effective when several are implemented at the same time.



### **“The feeding area is messy and attracts insects/wildlife.”**

- Keep the cats’ feeding area neat, clean, and free of leftover food and trash.
- Do not overfeed the cats; leftover food draws insects and other animals, which can trigger complaints.
- Remove leftover food after an hour. Be sure to remove dry as well as canned food. The cats will adjust to a specific feeding time.
- Feed during daylight hours and remove any remaining food before dusk to minimize cat/wildlife interactions.
- Always feed in bowls or trays, never directly on the ground.
- Pour out the water bowl and refill it with fresh water daily to prevent mosquitoes from breeding in it.

### **“There are cats hanging around!”**

Adjusting the physical situation can usually address this concern – the old adage “out of sight, out of mind” applies here.

- Locate the feeding area, and any shelters for the cats, away from public view.  
If the cats are being fed in a public spot, the site can easily be changed to another nearby location. For example, the feeding area can be moved from in front of a building to an out-of-view place at the back of the parking lot, or from in front of a dumpster into a nearby wooded area or behind a fence. In some cases feeding areas can be moved several yards over a property line to a place where the cats are welcome. The cats usually adapt quickly, but depending upon the situation you may want to make the move incrementally over the course of a few days.  
Keep in mind that the cats’ natural instinct to be fearful of people helps them to survive. Keeping the cats out of sight helps them retain their wariness and prevents injury to the cats, as well as complaints and drop-offs.
- Do not feed at peak hours when people are most likely to be in the area and see the cats. For example, if you always feed on your way into work and people entering the building see the entire colony waiting for you, they may think there has been a population explosion! Change the feeding time and location.
- Discourage others from leaving handouts for the cats. If other people are leaving food scraps around, invite them to join you in creating a feeding schedule for the cats at the designated feeding location. (If you cannot identify the feeder in person, try leaving a polite note with your phone number or e-mail address where the food was left.)

- If you provide a feeding station or shelter for the cats, it's best to make it as inconspicuous as possible. Painting shelters and feeding stations green, brown, or some other natural color helps them blend into the environment.

**“Cats are sleeping under my porch.”**

Cats sleeping under a neighbor's house, in a shed, or other locations are seeking a warm, dry, safe, shelter from the elements.

- Recommend that the property owners physically block or seal the location the cats are entering with chicken wire or lattice when they are sure the cats are not there. (You could offer to help with this.)
- Provide shelters for the cats. (The Alley Cat Allies website offers information on how to build a shelter.) A colony may need multiple shelters. Place the shelters away from public view and paint them an inconspicuous earth color.

**“Cats are getting into my trash.”**

Cats and many wild animals are opportunistic scavengers.

- Scavenging can be reduced by providing regular food for the cats at a set time and in an out-of-the-way location.
- Keep trash properly covered and secured to avoid attracting raccoons, skunks, and possums, in addition to cats.

**“Cats are hanging out in my yard.”**

There are many safe, low-tech methods to discourage feral cats from hanging out where they are not wanted. Offer to provide and apply these methods at your own expense. If there are other caregivers, consider pooling resources to cover the cost of such items.

- Be sure the cats are neutered; this curtails the urge to roam and mark territory.
- Use a repellent to keep cats out of the area. There are several types of repellents:
  - Chemical repellents (keep in mind that these need to be reapplied routinely). Cat and dog repellent (get the yard and garden type) can be purchase at most large garden centers, home improvement stores, and pet supply stores, as well as online. Some of the common brands are Repel Away From My Garden, Havahart Cat Repellent (uses capsaicin pepper and oil of mustard), and Reppers.
 

Repellants should be sprayed or distributed around the edges of the yard, the top of fences, and on any favorite digging areas or plants.
  - Motion-activated water sprinkler/repellers, such as The Scarecrow, work to keep cats out of yards.
  - Ultrasonic devices, such as Cat Stop Automatic Outdoor Cat Deterrent or Yard Control Cat Repeller, Model P7810, emit a high-frequency sound that is annoying to cats, but not perceptible by people. The key to their effectiveness is matching the capacity of the device to the size of the area to be covered. If the device is not powerful enough for the area, it won't work. Devices designed for rodents will not be effective with cats.
  - Household items and herbs that repel cats include cayenne pepper, citrus peels, coffee grounds, pipe tobacco, citrus-scented sprays, and oils of lavender, lemon

grass, citronella, peppermint, eucalyptus, and mustard. Keep in mind that these need to be reapplied routinely.

- Plants that repel cats include the border plant Coleus-Canina, now being marketed as an effective scent deterrent for dogs and cats. The herb rue can also be planted to repel cats.
- Do not feed birds on the ground. Use hanging or post bird feeders that cats cannot reach.
- Put up a six-foot fence that comes right to the ground.
- As a last resort, you can enclose your own yard with cat fence to keep the cats confined to your property. Purrfect Cat Fence and Cat Fence In Systems are two types of cat fencing that can be found online.

### **“Cats are digging in my garden.”**

- Use one of the repellents listed above.
- Create a physical barrier to digging:
  - Protect gardens and flower beds from digging with Cat Scat plastic mats, which can be purchased online and pressed into the soil. Each mat has flexible plastic spikes, which are harmless to cats and other animals but discourage digging. Heavy plastic carpet runner (pointed side up) also works.
  - Cover exposed ground in flower beds with attractive rocks.
  - Take branches from a thorny plant and lay them on the ground in a lattice-type pattern, then plant flowers and seeds in the openings. Wooden or plastic lattice fencing material can be used in the same way.
  - Set chicken wire firmly into the dirt (sharp edges rolled under).
  - Embed pinecones, wooden chopsticks, skewers, or plant stakes into the soil every eight inches.
  - Keep sandboxes covered when children are not playing in them.
- Make an outdoor litter box in an acceptable place (works especially well when combined with a deterrent to digging in the old favorite spots).
  - Dig up, loosen, or till the soil, as you would for a garden, in an acceptable, out-of-the-way spot in your yard.
  - Take a very large plastic storage container, make drainage holes in the bottom, and fill it with sandbox sand. Some people use a taller storage container and leave the lid on to protect the sand from the elements, cutting large entry and exit holes on both ends. The sand will need to be scooped regularly and replaced periodically. Putting a couple of pieces of the cats' feces into the boxes initially helps them get the idea.
  - Cats love peat moss for doing their business. A four-foot-square area, six to eight inches deep, in a corner of the yard, replaced once a month or so, works nicely. It's very inexpensive and easy to handle and dispose of.



**“Cats are drinking from my swimming pool.”**

- If cats are coming to drink from a swimming pool or landscaped pond, provide alternative water away from the pool. Be sure to change the water frequently.

**“I can smell cat urine.”**

- Eliminate the smell of cat urine by rinsing the area thoroughly with white vinegar, which is sold inexpensively by the gallon at supermarkets, or with products available in pet supply stores.
- Neutering the cats is the best way to reduce or eliminate their desire to spray-mark and makes the smell of cat urine less pungent.

**“Cats are making a lot of noise, fighting, yowling, spraying, and breeding.”**

- These are all behaviors associated with feline mating. The solution is to humanely trap and neuter the entire colony. Once cats are neutered the hormones leave their system within three weeks, and the behaviors usually stop.

**“Cats are walking on my car.”**

- Purchase a car cover to protect the car from cat prints.
- Cats like a high platform from which to view the world. Provide a table, create a platform in a tree, or provide a shelter that cats can lie on top of, as well as inside – anything that gives them a higher vantage point.
- Move shelters and feeding stations away from the area where cars are parked. The cats will follow the food and shelter.
- Sometimes in the winter cats will lie on a car hood for warmth. Provide shelters with outdoor heating pads (available online for doghouses) to keep them warm and away from cars.

**“The cats might have fleas.”**

- If fleas are a problem in your area, have your veterinarian treat for fleas when the cats are spayed or neutered. Revolution works well and can sometimes be reapplied if you are able to touch the cats while they are eating. Another option for ongoing flea control is Capstar, which can be put into the food.
- Change the straw bedding material in the cats' shelters regularly. Sprinkle a nontoxic herbal flea powder, other flea powder that is safe for cats, or diatomaceous earth (be sure to use food grade) beneath the bedding material inside the shelters. Spaying the interior of the cats' shelters with Insect Growth Regulator, available online in a concentrate without insecticides, is effective in long-term flea control (allow it to dry before the cats come in contact with it).

**“I'm worried about our (or our children's) health and safety.”**

- Feral cats are naturally wary of people and will not approach humans they do not know. Feral cats will not attack anyone unless they are cornered.
- It's always a good practice to avoid touching or cornering any animal you are not familiar with and to wash your hands thoroughly after gardening. Parents and caregivers should teach children to not approach or touch ANY unknown animal.

- Studies show that feral cats and owned cats share similar health status and do not pose a risk to public health. (Refer to the Alley Cat Allies website for further details.)
- TNR involves vaccinating and neutering the cats and providing ongoing care to them. It is the very best way to protect the public, as the cats create an immune barrier between humans and wildlife.

**“The area will become a dumping ground for cats.”**

- Keep feeding stations and shelters out of view so that it’s not obvious that cats are cared for there.
- As part of TNR, a new cat that appears must be humanely trapped, then either reunited with his owner, adopted into a home (if tame), or neutered, vaccinated, and returned as the other cats have been.
- If dumping is already a problem in the area, post official-looking signs stating that dumping cats is criminal abandonment punishable by law and that the area is monitored. Ask all caregivers and neighbors to keep an eye out for cats being dumped and to try to get the car license numbers so that an official police report can be filed.

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Photos by Molly Wald.