

Cats in the Garden! What to Do?



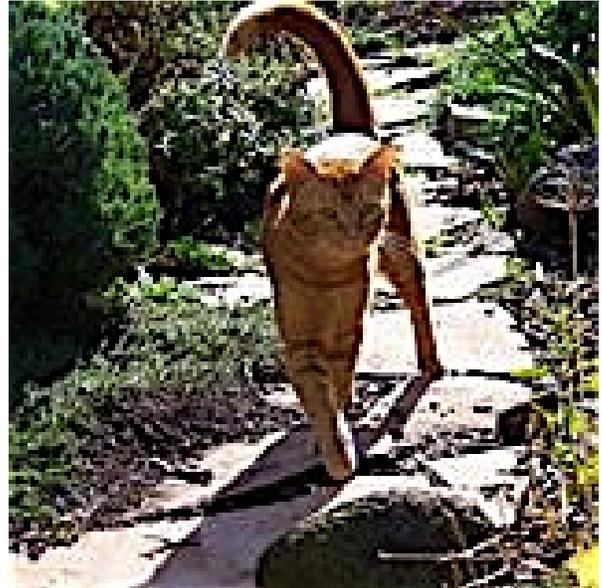
University of California

Agriculture and Natural Resources

UCCE Master Gardener Program

The help desk frequently gets questions regarding cats in the vegetable garden. “My cat is using my vegetable garden as a litter box. Can I still eat the vegetables?” “How can I keep the neighborhood cats out of my garden?”

Talking about cat feces is an unpleasant topic but questions about soil contamination are very important. Cats like to use soft soil as a litter box and cat feces can be source of serious diseases in humans. One of these is toxoplasmosis, which can cause miscarriages, or be passed from the mother to an unborn baby causing serious health conditions later in the child’s life. Toxoplasmosis can be life threatening for those with compromised immune systems. Any animal waste, not just cats, can also contaminate the soil with other parasites such as roundworm and hookworm and bacteria such as E. coli or Salmonella.



So what to do if a cat uses your vegetable garden as a litter box? It must be cleaned and the sooner the better. Make sure you:

- Remove the all feces if possible and the immediate surrounding soil.
- Dispose of any produce that came in direct contact with feces.
- While in the garden remove excess soil from produce.
- Wash produce under running tap water rather than batch washing in a basin. Washing produce in a basin can result in cross contamination.
- Wash your tools, boots and gloves - away from the garden area.
- Always wear gloves while gardening.

There are many opportunities for bacteria and parasites to contaminate your food from your garden before it gets to your kitchen. Water, tools, animals, manure or contaminated soil may spread harmful organisms in your garden. Incorporate good food safety practices in all phases of your gardening. To read more about food safety practices please see UC’s Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources Publication 8366, [Food Safety in Your Home Vegetable Garden](#).

But to that other question - how to keep cats out of your vegetable garden? There are many, many suggestions and it may take some experimenting to find what works for the cats in your neighborhood.

The most effective method is to block access. Use a chicken wire fence or wire cage around your bed, or floating row covers*. If you don't have small children a low voltage wire can be effective. Place it about 4 inches above the edge of the raised bed and attach it to fiberglass rods pushed into the soil at each corner of the bed. The wires should run to each rod and then to an electric fence charger; some of which are battery-powered. Once the cats learn to avoid the beds, you can dismantle the fence or turn it off or remove batteries.



Since cats like the garden's soft soil your goal is to make it less attractive to them. Chicken wire laid above the soil keeps them from digging. Or make the soil uncomfortable for cats to walk on by using rough textured mulch or sprinkling prickly pinecones throughout out your garden. Placing chop sticks or 10 inch plant stakes every 8 inches will discourage cats from scratching and digging which is necessary for them to use your garden as a bathroom. It is thought cats dislike citrus smell so sprinkling lemon or orange peel in your garden can be a deterrent.

There are many products on the market such as motion-activated sprinklers and ultrasonic devices that will deter cats from coming into your garden. You can read more about these and other ways to deter visiting cats in the ASPCA's website article [Keeping Cats out of Your Yard](#) and the article [10 Tips for Keeping Cats Away](#) on the Fix our Ferals website.

* For more information about row covers see [UC IPM Pest in Gardens and Landscape Protective Covers](#).

Got home gardening questions?

The Alameda County Master Gardener's help line is staffed Monday, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 10 to 1, 510-639-1371 or email us at anrmgalameda@ucanr.edu If emailing please provide the following information:

- Name, phone number and city
- Problem description - name of plant if applicable, when the problem began, cultural history such as watering, fertilizing, pruning, pesticides, etc.
- Photographs of the problem, if possible