

CATS AND GARDENERS SHOULD BE FRIENDS

BY SALLY CUNNINGHAM



Sally Cunningham is a Western New York garden writer, lecturer and consultant. Her book Great Garden Companions: A Planting System for a Beautiful, Chemical-Free Vegetable Garden teaches organic vegetable gardening using flowers and herbs to encourage beneficial insects and she promotes landscaping in harmony with nature. Sally wrote the following article exclusively for Feral Cat FOCUS.

As the “garden lady” who answers questions almost every day all year long, I confess that a few questions upset me, starting with the “how do I kill...” and “how do I get rid of...” questions. I don’t ever advocate killing animals (even insects most of the time).

Somehow, I believe that gardeners—who are supposedly enjoying nature and creating beautiful places—can grow vegetables and flowers without killing things.

You fence, deter, repel pests, choose problem-free plants or arrange the garden or yard differently to avoid problems.

A CALL FOR COMPASSION

Then come the “I hate deer, mice, rabbits—or cats—statements.” I understand that many creatures damage expensive landscapes, and frustrate or annoy gardeners. I understand that it’s disgusting to bump into cat poop when you are handling your soil or digging with a trowel. And it’s discouraging to find your recently seeded salad garden scratched up like a litter. Nobody likes a urine smell, or the even stronger odors of a male cat spraying to mark territory. But the amount of anger and venom from some complainers baffles me: The perpetrators are cats who were born to be domestic pets, who did not ask to be strays, who would like a safe home and clean litter box, and who are only doing what comes naturally. *Should we really be enraged at them?*

I know I am preaching to the believers, who already care deeply about cats, and I would like to empower you with good answers to the complaints about cats “ruining the garden.” But first I hope you can solicit from the disgruntled crowd a little compassion. Remind them that it’s not the cats’ fault that our society needs to take responsibility for neutering and for adopting rather than buying pets, and for humane solutions to the overpopulation problem. *Then* we can make some pragmatic suggestions for keeping a nice garden in spite of cats roaming free.

CHANGE THE ARRANGEMENT

For a time I had cats in my barn (not of my choosing) as well as inside cats—until I could catch, neuter and tame the outdoor cats. (My barn is not a cozy, cat-friendly barn and it was heartbreaking to have animals out there in cold weather, and difficult to keep up with the fresh water and food.) But during those years the cats wanted to eliminate in my well-cultivated raised beds and perennial gardens, the more recently dug the better.

Chicken wire was my entirely satisfactory solution. Chicken wire is a great medium (although any screening or cage material will do) because it is easy to cut, even for small hands. A wire

cutter works best—don't wreck your pruners—but most scissors can cut the thin wire. Simply cut sections of wire to fit over any exposed soil. If looks count, put a layer of mulch (leaves or shredded bark) on top. Slippery plastic is also unpleasant under cat feet. Either way, cats do not like digging into wire or scratching plastic, and they will move on to better places to dig.

DISCOURAGE OR SCARE THEM AWAY

If you have a friendly outdoor cat—perhaps your neighbor's pet let loose (whether or not that's a good idea)—you can apply the same tactics you might use to train a cat not to scratch the sofa. You must be in the garden when kitty comes by. Be ready with a coffee can containing some coins (which makes a terrible noise) and shake it just as she starts to dig. Or shoot water from a squirt gun. It takes some strategy, but can work with individual domesticated cats.

Since most people aren't in the garden just waiting for a cat visit, more serious scare tactics may be needed. (Some brand names are mentioned, but you may find many more choices.) A motion-activated sprinkler such as *Scare Crow Sprinkler*, or a high-frequency emitting noise maker (*Cat Stop*) will give most creatures a good scare, and cats tend to remember unpleasant experiences. Fences made for rabbits such as the Mr. McGregor Fence may be worth the investment for some. Before those larger purchases I would recommend trying repellent spray or powder products, of which there are many. (*Shake-Away* products are made to repel cats and dogs, using coyote and other predators' urine.) These and similar scent-based repellent products generally test well, although you must reapply most of them after rainfall.

Gardeners may also try planting a lot of lavender, which is disliked by both cats and rabbits and is not eaten by deer.

...OR JUST ENJOY THEM

Is it really a big deal if you find a cat poop occasionally in the garden? Or if an animal urinated out there—soon to be washed away by rain? We all know, of course, that animal feces can contain parasites, pregnant women shouldn't handle feces, and of course we don't want the salad garden to be a litter pan! But if you're not facing a large-scale urban crisis, with hordes of stray cats, then perhaps we should relax about the occasional cat or other animal passing through and leaving its traces. We're in nature. Animals poop. We should wash our hands and our produce anyway.



In England, perhaps more than here, cats are often photographed in gardens. They are certainly more beautiful than most garden props one could ever buy. Some people manage to have cats that simply lounge in the yard with them, and add great enjoyment to the experience. If your garden is a safe, fenced place, and you have the luxury of gardening with a cat, you are lucky.

Enjoy the fortunate pet cats that grace your garden, and put in a kind word on behalf of those who are not so welcome.