

CCGA'S GUIDE TO The Presence of Rats in COMMUNITY GARDENS

There is a concern among some people in Chicago that growing a garden, especially a food garden, will attract rats. Before you jump to that conclusion, please consider the following:

Every living Creature requires three things to survive: Food, Water and Shelter. Removing or altering anyone of these three things will negatively impact a creature's ability to survive and they will leave to find them somewhere else.

Background on the presence of rats in Chicago:

The common brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*- also called the Norway rat or sewer rat) is a destructive animal pest found in any city because they thrive in the same places that human beings live.

Where they live:

Rats can be found in sewers or any place where garbage and refuse is located. They can be found living in (or under) any city. They are equally at home in dry, dusty environments as they are in dank, wet ones. They build their nests outside the walls of homes and other buildings or in various clumps of vegetation and may also construct their homes beneath the edges of sidewalks or patios. They live in almost complete darkness, rarely emerging in daylight.

City Rats thrive in environments where humans live that have dark holes and broken walls such as in abandoned and derelict buildings. The presence of rats can be detected by droppings or evidence of fresh gnawing, though there are many other wild animals in the city that leave droppings, tracks and evidence of gnawing. Tracks can be seen in mud and on dusty surfaces. Runways and burrows may be found next to buildings, along fences, and under raised beds in community gardens and under low vegetation and debris.

What They Eat:

Rats live off of whatever they can find that is edible. A typical City Rat diet consists of garbage that is carelessly left around or is easily accessible in the garbage cans in our alleys and which, unfortunately, are often left open and overflowing. They also enjoy food scraps thrown down on the ground from people and pets. They are the original "junk food junkies" – they thrive on what people so often seek out for a quick high calorie meal – fatty, cooked foods. They are also extremely fond of what your dog leaves behind, both before and after dinner when you take him for a walk (yes, excrement). Only if they can't find any of their preferred food, will they seek out fresh vegetables or fruit from a garden. "Rats will eat nearly any type of food, but they prefer high-quality foods such as meat and fresh grain." *

How to Control Rats:

Rats will come into gardens and houses for a number of reasons. First and foremost, rats are always on the look out for food (foraging), and if they find food, they will seek shelter and "move in", setting up residence under decking, sheds or nice warm, un-managed compost heaps and breed. Rats will NOT come into your garden if you do the following:



How to Reduce the Risk of Rats Being Attracted to Your Garden

Practice Good Sanitation

Provide NO Shelter

Deprive them of Preferred Food

The following tips will reduce the chances of having rats establish themselves in your garden:

- Ensure that drains are in good condition and good repair and there is no standing water.
- When feeding birds in your garden, use a bird feeder and ensure that any food that falls to the ground is cleared away daily. You may choose to stop feeding the birds in your garden for a period of time, especially in the summer when you really want the birds to be munching on insects in your garden and the naturally occurring seeds and berries from trees and perennials.
- Don't leave food lying around on the ground in your garden for wildlife or homeless cats.
- Clean away spillages of food as well as excrement from rabbits and dogs,
- Do not put meat or other non-vegetable/fruit food waste onto composters and where possible use a properly designed composting unit.
- The compost heap offers warmth and shelter, but is not a food source unless high protein, cooked foods, meat and fatty refuse as well as grains, eggs, cheese and dairy products are added to the compost – NEVER add these things to your open compost bin.
- Out buildings and sheds should be constructed and manufactured so that rats cannot gain access. Particular attention should be paid to any gaps around the door. Remember they can enter through very small spaces – so leave no gaps at all.
- Ensure that gardens do not become overgrown or allow rubbish to build up even in nearby alleys e.g., old mattresses and furniture, as this will provide shelter for rats to live in and under.
- Inspect your garbage containers and those near your community garden or nearby alleys, to insure they are not over-flowing and are closed and not accessible by rats or other animals roaming around. It is the waste in a garbage can that rats like best. Close the can and keep the rats away! Request replacement bins for damaged bins where rats have gnawed holes. Contact your ward alderperson.
- Clean up the refuse and garbage lying around in your alley and in any empty sheds or buildings in your neighborhood. Good sanitary practices will not eliminate rats under all conditions, but will make the environment less suitable for them to thrive.

What Should I Do If I See A Rat (or what I think is evidence of a rat) In our community garden?

First, don't jump to the conclusion that gnawed or missing vegetables are the result of the presence of rats. Squirrels are more than likely responsible for stealing your vegetables and then leaving the evidence behind just to irritate you. Other city wildlife, like opossum, groundhogs, raccoons and rabbits are also responsible for eating your precious vegetables. And yes, community gardeners experience wildlife contact with many creatures in Chicago!

Follow the above suggestions and you will be able to eliminate the things that will attract rats, which is the cause of the problem. That will go a long way to eliminating the problem...and will be the end of the matter.

Conclusion: Remember that rats need three things: Food, Water and Shelter.

If you eliminate the standing water and the food that rats prefer and don't provide places where they can find shelter...you won't have a serious problem with rats. And at the same time, you will minimize the problems with other unwanted wildlife including insects.

Sources of information for this summary include:

- (1) *Entomologists at the Illinois Department of Public Health, University of Illinois, Illinois Natural History Survey, and Purdue University. For additional copies of their original document, contact your unit office of the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Urbana, Illinois 1995. Issued in furtherance of the Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dennis R. Campion, Interim Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. - Entomology Fact Sheet, NHE-PH-1, Revised 4/96
- (2) British Councils guide to rats in gardens
- (3) Experiences of many Chicago gardeners over many years

Please read the Chicago Compost Ordinance here to familiarize yourself with the rules and regulations governing the construction and management of organic garden wastes:

http://www.cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/doe/general/RecyclingAndWasteMgmtPDFs/Composting/Ordinance92607_3.pdf

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