

Dear Dr. Fill

This seems to be the summer for wildlife in my yard. I've seen skunks, raccoons, rabbits and groundhogs in my yard from time to time (thankfully not frequently). And to top it all off, my neighbour has a cat that is always coming over into my yard and I am concerned when I see him in my vegetable garden.

I know that e-coli outbreaks happen when wildlife contaminates crops so I'm very concerned that he might start to use my garden as his litter box. I've asked the neighbours repeatedly to keep the cat inside, but they refuse.

My two questions are:
1) Is there any inexpensive way to keep a cat and other critters out of my vegetable garden that won't harm the animals? I really don't want the expense of fencing it all in.

2) If animals have already used my garden to do their business without me knowing, will washing my harvest really well make it safe to eat? I'm also curious about those products they sell in grocery stores for washing produce. Are they really effective at removing any more bacteria than just soap and water?

If you offer a suggestion for keeping the cat out that works and I do it now, would any risk of eating my produce that's already been contaminated be gone by harvest time, due to rains and watering?

I grow vegetables because I want organic veggies that aren't coated in pesticides, but perhaps they're safer to eat than what I'm growing at home with all of these four footed furry beasts roaming through

my yard!

**Sincerely
Concerned gardener**



**Dear
Gardener,**

Concerned
Finding that animals are damaging our gardens is a nightmare for many gardeners. It's hard enough to battle with cucumber beetles and earwigs and slugs, but when you're at war with raccoons and skunks and cats and groundhogs, it's a whole new ball game! They can create so much damage in just one night digging and munching away and yes, peeing and pooping. New gardeners might be tempted to give up, but gardening is too great a hobby to give up – we just need to be smarter than they are. That shouldn't be too difficult (with the possible exception of raccoons which I'm convinced have gone to engineering school to learn how to open garden gates and locked garbage bins!)

You certainly do have a right to be concerned about animals using your garden as a litter box. Cats like to use soft soil as a litter box and cat feces can be a source of serious diseases in humans. One of the risks is toxoplasmosis, which usually doesn't cause severe symptoms in people who are healthy, but can cause very serious problems for women who are pregnant, and can be life threatening for those with compromised immune systems. Cats can also carry other bacteria and viruses that can cause mild to gastrointestinal illness, such as salmonella and E.

coli, as well as hookworms and roundworms. If you have a good, healthy immune system, your body can often tolerate small amounts of many of these contaminants, and you might never realize that you've ingested them. And we all wash our produce before we eat it any way. But the real solution isn't washing your produce – it's keeping the cat out of your garden!

If a cat has been actively using your garden as a litter box, you'll need to remove all feces if possible and removing the immediate surrounding soil is also recommended. The feces is dangerous – their urine is far less so. Then sadly, you'll need to dispose of any produce that came in direct contact with feces. Then you need to keep the cat from returning and they are creatures of habit, so this sometimes requires some shrewd tactics.

My solution, which has worked wonderfully well for cats and raccoons and rabbits, is placing plastic forks in the garden. I buy large bags at the Dollar Store and stick the handle end in the ground and leave the tines sticking out of the ground throughout my garden. It's not pretty but it's always worked! (Of course, when I first heard that my raccoons might thank me for the forks that they planned to use as shovels to dig up my carrots and radish, but apparently, they're not as smart as I gave them credit for, because I haven't had a single one in my garden since I installed the forks!)

Gardeners who like a more natural looking barrier say they place inexpensive sharp bamboo skewers in the soil every few inches to

discourage cats from scratching and digging.

Another alternative for your cat problem (if your garden is quite small) is to make the soft soil that they love so much less attractive. Chicken wire laid above the soil often keeps them from digging as they don't like the feeling of the wire on their paws, and this still allows all your plants to grow through.

You can also make the soil uncomfortable for cats to walk on by using rough textured mulch or sprinkling things like prickly pinecones throughout your garden. There are many products on the market such as motion-activated sprinklers and ultrasonic devices that claim to deter cats and other animals from coming into your garden. I have no personal experience with these, so can't vouch for them. If other members have found these to be effective against cats, raccoons, or groundhogs, perhaps they could let Claudia know and she could pass the information along.

A friend of mine also passed along this little tip. If you have bird feeders near your veggie patch, try moving them away from the garden. Cats may have decided that hiding among your tomato plants (and often destroying them while doing so) is a great way to stalk a bird. (I also have a neighbour-hood cat who comes to my yard to hunt birds at my feeders, and I've had to use my "plastic fork defense" under some shrubs where it liked to hide. I stuck a few forks in the ground around and under the shrubs, and the cat seemed to get the message that he wasn't welcome!

Some gardeners say they've had great success when they spread 2 to 4 inches of straw mulch over the soil. They say that cats enjoy rolling in bare dirt or using it as a litter box, but mulched soil is less attractive. Mulch, of course, also suppresses weeds and retains soil moisture for your vegetables so it's a win-win situation. Again, I've never tried this personally as my fork method worked so well, but it sounds like something that could work.

Of course, when we're trying to deter animals, we don't want to make our gardens more difficult for us to enjoy. I've read many websites that suggest things like laying a thick row of cuttings from things like thorny roses or barberry all around your vegetable patch as animals won't want to walk across them. Of course, neither would I, and I wouldn't want the worry of getting pricked by thorns every time I try to access my lettuce patch!

For most other small animal visitors, the most effective method is to block access. For small animals, building a chicken wire fence or wire cage around small raised beds should do the trick.

Even when you don't have furry animals roaming around, you should always use precautions when you bring in your vegetables, as you could have nighttime visitors that you're unaware of and even birds flying overhead can drop a few unwelcome gifts onto your garden below. Soaking things like lettuce in a bowl of cold water is NOT a good idea. Contamination from one single leaf can spread through the water to other leaves that had been

uncontaminated. The Centre for Disease Control says that holding produce under running water is somewhat effective, but washing produce under running tap water and rubbing then gently in your hands or with a small, soft brush as you do so is very effective. The same procedure is equally effective at removing pesticides. The CDC also stresses that washing fruits and vegetables with soap, detergent, or any of those commercial "produce wash" products is not recommended, and NEVER use bleach solutions or other disinfecting products on food.

The risk of contamination that could make us sick is relatively low, so this information should not scare anyone away from eating their daily servings of fresh produce. Their benefits far outweigh the risks, and if we use basic hygiene practices we can enjoy the fruits of our labours with no worry.

As for keeping animals other than cats out of your garden, there are a few options, depending on what animal you're dealing with.

Raccoons can be a HUGE problem. Sadly too many people fall in love with those cute little faces and feed them, so they lose all fear of people. Then those same people realize they will tip over your garbage cans in the night, leaving you a huge mess to clean up in the morning. They will spread ticks, fleas and other parasites to your yard and pets. They will leave their urine and droppings in your yard and gardens, and under the right circumstances, they will not hesitate to attack and bite. Their poop may even be on your deck, if

they start to feel safe in your yard, and coming in direct contact with these droppings or inhaling their particles can be very dangerous to your health.

Gardeners who grow corn can almost expect a visit from a raccoon. Many people find that planting squash or cucumbers around your corn or other plants will deter raccoons since they don't like walking on the prickly squash vines.

Raccoons are nocturnal, so they'll be out looking for food during the night time. They like it nice and dark when they're doing their scavenging so motion sensing lights that turn on every time someone or something, steps close to your garden is a good way to scare raccoons off. They're smart so they may get used to it over time though, so it's good to have a backup plan. If your garden is close to your house, wild life experts say that playing a talk radio station all night - so long as it's not loud enough to disturb your neighbours - can also help to scare away roaming raccoons. (Once again, I don't think those experts have met MY raccoons - they would walk up to the radio and turn the dial from a talk station to one that plays their favourite tunes.)

Obviously, building a fence around the entire perimeter of your garden will help keep animals out. But remember, raccoons are very good climbers. So if it's just a simple fence, a raccoon will be able to climb over it with no problems at all.

Groundhogs are even harder to deter; they are good climbers AND expert diggers, so any fence you put up must be 5-foot tall - 3 to 4-foot above the

ground with at least one foot buried below the ground. Sadly, we often have to resort to live trapping and releasing - FAR away - if we have groundhogs visiting our veggie garden.

Here's one last bit of wisdom I've recently learned. Many books recommend using lights as a way to keep nighttime prowlers out of your garden. Studies now seem to show that leaving lights on at night significantly increases damage to your plants from insects. I've come to the conclusion that sometimes we gardeners just have to decide that we'll plant one lettuce plant for us and one for the rabbits, one pea plant for us and one for the raccoon, and one strawberry plant for us and one for the skunk. And before we plant a garden, be sure to ask the neighbour if they have an outdoor cat!

Dr. Fill