

Can a cat be trained to scratch in appropriate places?

THE SOCIAL CAT... Training for your cat and you

Hitting the Mark with Cat Scratching

By Karen L. Overall, MA, VMD, Ph.D.

Q: My cat has scratched or sharpened her claws on the post of our front porch until it looks bad. What can I do for the problem?

Becky — Via e-mail

To start, you can thank your lucky stars that your cat has not gone after furniture, clothing or rugs. Most people who cohabit with cats would love to have your problem. Scratching is a normal behavior in cats and just about the only way we can affect it is by encouraging appropriate (by our standards) and desirable (by their standards) scratching surfaces.

Cat scratching is a lot more complex than people realize, and that complexity is one reason that fewer and fewer people favor de-clawing, known as onychectomy. Cats scratch, in part, to remove old nail-sheath material, which may give the appearance of sharpened claws. Actually, this is more akin to us filing our nails — most of us do not hone them as weapons when we do so. By scratching a rough surface, old, brittle claw sheaths are discarded. If young kittens are immediately provided with a variety of scratching surfaces that they like and that their humans can tolerate (like old logs, vertical and horizontal rugs, jute or hemp surfaces) they will almost never scratch surfaces that horrify and anger their people — unless the scratching is about something other than claw care. What most people fail to acknowledge are the social and olfactory components of scratching. In the wild, cats of all species scratch certain trees so that the tree acts as a marker for the cat's location and activity. More than one cat may contribute deep gashes, and the tree is revisited regularly to freshen the marks. In this case, other cats are able to use both the visible mark and the olfactory cue to learn who last visited the tree and when it was last visited. The latter information is important if one cat is trying to avoid getting in the way of another's social group or foraging ground.

Unfortunately, behavioral biologists have been almost wholly uninterested in feline scratching, which means that we know very little about it. Given what we know about other forms of marking, we can guess that such ritualized scratching serves to announce presence, activity, possibly status (such as an intact male trolling for females), temperament and many other cues that we are too inept to interpret because we have such a lousy sense of smell compared to cats. All of us must realize, though, that cats do not scratch to annoy us: they scratch to communicate something and the cues are physical and olfactory. This is one aspect of de-clawing that has never been investigated and until we understand how such elective surgeries affect normal feline behavior, we could do best to avoid them.

It's interesting that your cat chooses a post on your front porch. It's possible that other cats visit and this is the clearest way your cat can communicate with them. If this is true, the post's location is important to your cat, and whatever you do to repair or replace the post and provide the old post right next to it so your cat can still use it as a calling card. This way you have an aesthetically pleasing porch, and a "cat-art" sculpture that you can label and talk about as a curiosity to your friends. If you are not quite so adventurous, you can place a scratching post made of similar material, or another surface your cat likes like old logs or old rugs, next to your post and see if the cat used it. If she does, you can gradually move it no more than 1 centimeter a day, until it is far enough away from this post that you can be sure she has transferred her affection. Then — and only then — you can get out the filler and paint.

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Scratching and clawing is a normal behavior in cats. Keep furniture safe by setting up your cat with its' own scratching post or cat tree.