



Rats

by Donna K. Luallen, UC Master Gardener

For me, it started on a cool spring evening when my husband and I were disturbed by the sound of gnawing behind the wall near the fireplace.

There was that distinctive rhythmic chewing sound, occasionally punctuated with the scratching of tiny toenails. A RAT!

We immediately pulled out our rattraps, applied peanut butter as bait, and headed for the attic. In 2 days we disposed of a quickly-killed roof rat. We congratulated ourselves and settled in for a little television. But our work wasn't done.

A thorough inspection of the roof revealed a wooden beam between roof and patio with obvious tooth marks. We set out a battalion of traps with delicacies ranging from bacon to candy bars outside the entrance and inside the attic, but our rats had a very short learning curve. In four weeks they never touched the traps.

We purchased rat poison in the form of blocks to put in the attic. The instructions cautioned us to make sure the bait was securely fastened so that it wouldn't fall to the ground and be found by pets or children. We were still hearing noises five days later, sometimes quite vigorous. The greedy little beasts were scooting along the blocks to their hideouts.

We finally hired a professional. I followed him into the attic where he pointed out the tiny tracks of our unwanted guests in the dust on top of electrical lines and ducting.

The professional located trails along the interior walls that disappeared into those walls at a depth beyond his reach. All our traps were still untouched, but he found no evidence of the poison and no rat carcasses. It was a little later that I caught the first whiff of that unpleasant odor of decay.

In the Central Valley, we have Norway Rats and Roof Rats. The Norway Rats are large ground dwellers and will range 100-150 feet for food and water. They burrow and can even undermine a building foundation.

Roof Rats are somewhat sleeker in build, preferring to nest above ground in palm trees, evergreens or thick vining vegetation. They run quite nimbly up stucco walls or wood fences. They enjoy avocados and citrus and will happily ruin tomatoes just as they ripen.



(Photo: Getty Images/Stockphoto)

I first became aware of rats in our yard when I saw one pilfering the birdseed on a feeder. We trapped two under the heavy vines of the tomatoes, well away from nosy cats. They do have at least one virtue: They eat snails and slugs!

To manage rats, homeowners should secure their houses by closing entry points with heavy steel wire mesh, stapled securely over the opening, and trimming trees to at least 3 feet away from the roof. Seal cracks and openings that may be larger than ¼ inch wide around the house's foundation. Remove food sources such as feeders for pets; feed pets only the food they will eat in a single meal.

Traps are advisable, but know that once a rat perceives the trap or bait as dangerous, he won't return. Two traps facing each other on a narrow fence rail may provide a double opportunity to catch the prey, but be mindful that traps can also snare cats and birds. Use baits as a last resort and consider calling in a professional to protect against risk to pets or children.

Female rats come into heat every 4-5 days and gestation is approximately 22 days. A rat infestation will multiply very quickly and spread throughout the neighborhood, if you ignore the problem. Keeping an eye out for rats is another way to contribute to the community.

Small efforts will go a long way. For more information about managing rats, see the UC Pest Note on Rats: <http://ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74106.html>.

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