

## **A Guide to Scratching Posts**

Cats scratch to smooth out the rims of their claws which gradually get frayed. Scratching is also an instinctive method of marking territory. Each scratch leaves secretions from glands in a cat's feet, a scent that gets other cat's attention.

The cat's retractable claws are also used for defense and add to the animal's grace and acrobatic ability. But those claws can also rake a new sofa to shreds and lash a small child's cheek during a playful encounter. Sometimes declawing is all that will keep peace in the family. Even though declawing is not the ideal alternative, maybe it's better to declaw a cat so that he can't claw up the sofa.

Buy or make a scratching post. Make sure it is strong enough not to wobble and tall enough to accommodate a cat at full stretch. Sisal and corrugated cardboard make good scratching post surfaces. Avoid carpeting as it is easy to tear up and looks terrible once it is broken in. Also, the cat will have a hard time differentiating between "good" carpet to scratch (the post) and "bad" carpet to scratch (your living room rug) so you may create a new problem.

Praise your cat when she uses the post. Make the post a fun place to be by placing toys on or around it or rubbing it with catnip. Make sure to put it in an accessible area. If you're trying to discourage the cat from scratching a particular piece of furniture, try placing the post in front of it, gradually moving the post aside as the cat begins to use it regularly. In addition, make the piece of furniture not much fun to scratch. Try covering it with a sheet, making it wobbly or covering it with double-sided tape (make sure it won't hurt the surface first). You can also place a cotton ball of scented bath oil on or near it. Again, make sure it won't hurt the furniture's surface.

Train with a dual approach. Encourage the cat to claw the right things and discourage her from clawing the wrong things. Each time you bring the cat to the scratching post or she goes on her own, praise her, pet her and spend a minute playing at the post. If the cat begins to scratch where she isn't supposed to, call her by name, firmly telling her "no", and move her to the scratching post. Put her front legs up on the post and make scratching motions with them. Dangle a toy in front of the post so as she goes for the toy she'll touch the post. Most likely, she'll enjoy the feeling and continue using it afterwards. You can also "use" the post so that your scent will be on it and entice your cat to mark the territory herself.

Some owners use a spray bottle filled with plain water and squirt the cat on the back when she claws the furnishings. The only problem here is that you run the risk of the cat simply being afraid of you and the bottle will still scratch when you are not around. Try tempting her with a more suitable scratching surface first. If you do use the bottle, make sure to never spray her in the face.

Keep your cat's nails trimmed. Cutting the nails regularly may help a cat from scratching furnishings or at least reduce the damage done by her scratching. Get your kitten used to having her feet handled and her nails clipped while she's young. With an older cat, it may help to begin by handling the cat's feet under pleasurable circumstances. Then introduce the clipping procedure by approaching the cat while she's relaxed (or even napping) and clip only on nail per session. Praise your cat while you clip the nail, and reward her with a treat. If you are in doubt about the proper nail length, let your veterinarian instruct you.