

Rats in the garden

Rats are intelligent animals, but they are usually unwelcome visitors in our gardens. These common rodents are generally considered vermin and can spread potentially serious diseases, including leptospirosis, which can lead to Weil's disease. They feed on a variety of foods from spilt bird food and fruit, to root veg such as potatoes and carrots. In gardens, they can set up home beneath decking, in sheds or greenhouses, and compost bins.

Signs of rats in the garden

Rats are mostly nocturnal so you may not see them, but there are other signs of rat infestation to look out for:

- Runs – greasy tracks alongside walls, fences or buildings – are up to 10cm wide
- Cylindrical droppings (around 15mm long and 5mm wide)
- Gnawed wood (especially where food is stored) or plastic, for example to access a compost bin
- Parallel teeth marks in crops such as sweetcorn or potatoes
- Signs of a rats nest in garden – this could be a heap or loose ball of soft or shredded materials, made up of garden materials such as sticks and leaves, or paper and cardboard
- Burrows – signs of rats include a hole with a smooth opening around 6-9cm across, which could be the entrance to a rat's tunnel

How to get rid of rats in the garden

Stop feeding wild birds and animals



Like all living things, rats need food, water and shelter to survive. Remove at least one of these from your garden or allotment, and they will be less likely to stay. Rats feed on grain and may be attracted to your garden by fallen food from bird feeders. Stop feeding birds if you suspect rats are visiting your garden and secure chicken runs. Store bird and other animal food in secure containers, or stop feeding and focus on natural sources of seeds and berries.

Keep the garden tidy

Tidy gardens are less likely to attract rats as they provide less cover, but bear in mind that an excessively neat garden could be less hospitable for wildlife such as hedgehogs. Keep grass short, clear cluttered storage areas, remove rubbish and reduce overgrown areas, especially near fences or garden buildings.

Move things around

Rats are 'neo-phobic', which means they have a fear of new things. They don't like disruption to their territory, so place obstacles in their runs and move things around in the garden frequently.

Block access to decking

The space beneath decking is perfect for rats – it's sheltered, hard to reach and food scraps can fall between the planks. Sweep up any fallen food after alfresco meals. Block access if possible or consider installing a patio instead.

Block access to garden buildings

Securely block any holes in the walls, floors and doors of your garden buildings. To prevent entry, you could add a metal 'kick plate' to your shed door.

Protect your compost bin

Make your compost bin or heap uninviting – don't add meat, dairy or cooked food scraps and keep it moist (which rats don't like) by including plenty of green and brown materials. Watering the heap regularly can also deter them. Fixing chicken wire around the base of the bin can also help, as it prevents rats from being able to dig their way in. Turn the heap regularly but bear in mind that other wildlife uses compost heaps too. If rats have made a home in your bin, don't use the compost on edible crops.

Keep an eye on crops

There's not much you can do to keep rats off your crops. Rats will eat sweetcorn, pumpkins, squash, root vegetables and apples, so once harvested, store them somewhere secure. If you suspect that stored or growing crops have been nibbled by rats, don't eat them. Rats also eat seeds, so store them securely.

Remove water sources

Rats can't survive without water. While it's not advisable to remove garden ponds or bird baths, removing other sources of water, including dripping taps, can help deter rats. Secure drains and add baffles to drainpipes.

Encourage predators

Rats form a substantial part of a fox's diet, so – where possible – it's a good idea to give foxes space to live in your garden or allotment, too. Pets such as cats can also deter rats. Some cats will kill and may even eat rats, but they are not as effective predators as foxes.

Control them

As an absolute last resort, you may consider taking stronger measures to control rats. Do this only after all other efforts to deter them have been exhausted, as poisons can harm other wildlife in your garden and can get into the wider environment. First, identify where the rats are living and the feeding routes they take between them – in neighbouring gardens, too. Traps and poisons are sold at garden centres but must be used correctly – read the label. It's better and safer to contact your local council or professional pest controller. The most humane way to get rid of rats is to deter them using the methods mentioned above. If you have tried all of these without any improvement or need to get rid of rats quickly, this may be the time to call a reputable pest control company. Putting down poison or traps in the garden yourself can be dangerous to other garden wildlife.