

My Pet Has Issues!
by Amy B. Wallis, Ph.D.

We recently refinished our outdoor furniture, and now find that there are scratch marks on several chair legs. Our cats do not scratch our indoor furniture. We have seen them sharpening their claws on trees and praise them for their positive behavior. We have not caught the culprit, but have a spray bottle full of water available just in case we catch them in the act. Why do they do this, and how can we stop this destruction?

The most likely explanation is that now that the furniture is refinished, the cats are viewing it as essentially the same as the other wood surfaces they have been encouraged to scratch, such as trees. Cats scratch for a number of reasons: to mark territory with the sweat glands on the pads of their paws, as well as to stretch and exercise. Because your furniture is newly refinished, the cats probably feel a need to “mark” it as their own, much as many cats do with a new piece of furniture, rug, or even clothing brought into the home. Scratching is a very natural behavior for cats, and is difficult to eliminate completely. The spray bottle can certainly work as a deterrent, but of course, it only works when you are there to observe the behavior and respond. If the cats spend time outside without you, they will essentially learn not to scratch the furniture when you are around, but will continue to scratch the rest of the time.

There are two options, then, for successfully addressing inappropriate scratching. The first is to redirect the scratching to a more appropriate object. You can purchase or build a new scratching post, particularly one made out of a tree stump or wood, and place it near the furniture. Put treats around it, catnip on it, and do anything you can to make it a really, really fun thing to scratch. Then reward and encourage the cats to scratch at it. They will likely replace most of their furniture scratching with scratching the post instead – after all, who wouldn’t choose the option that leads to treats and positive attention!

The second option is to make the furniture an undesirable place to scratch. The best deterrent is to essentially “replace” the surface of the furniture with an undesirable surface. You can buy products designed for this purpose, such as double-sided tape strips, which you can place on the furniture surface, or temporarily attach aluminum foil to the furniture legs. There are also fragrances that you can spray onto the furniture (usually citrus scents) that cats find repellent. These can be very helpful, as can simply rubbing lemon or orange rind on the furniture each time you are letting the cats out.