

IF YOU SEE A RAT...



(The following was taken from the July/August 2004 Town Newsletter. The information was compiled by former Ward 5 Council Member and Mayor, John Rogard-Tabori.)

Recently, residents of the greater Washington, DC area, including University Park, have encountered rats more frequently than usual. This probably is due to the end of the spring drought and the current increase in tasty food morsels, namely cicadas. Rats can pose a considerable health hazard. It is not uncommon to hear about rats biting small children or pets, and they are known to spread over 46 diseases that can afflict humans and domestic animals. Since rats live in colonies, it is likely that seeing one might mean others may be in the vicinity, although they tend to wander no more than fifty feet from their nest entrance. While control of these pests requires work and persistence, it can be successful. Control methods fall into three categories: sanitation, rodent proofing, and population reduction.

SANITATION requires the creation of an effective cleanup program and persistence in keeping the environment sanitary. In order to survive, rats need food, shelter and water. A good sanitation program can eliminate the food and shelter. Care should be given to removing piles of lumber and paper, unused storage boxes, trashy areas in sheds/garages, and yard waste, such as branches. **Garbage bins must be secured with tight-fitting lids.** Impossible as it seems, rats can squeeze through a half-inch opening (and mice through a quarter-inch opening)! So, tight means tight! **It also is essential to be a conscientious pet owner. Animal waste is a prime source of food for rats** and should be disposed of immediately in a secure bin. Cat owners should not keep litter boxes outside. When pets are fed outside, leftovers should be removed after feeding. Bird feeders also should be made inaccessible to rats and mice. Feeders on poles should be fitted with a “rat collar” and placed more than eight feet from tree branches and window ledges. Bird seed, grass seed, dry pet food and all dry food items should be stored in gnaw-proof containers with tight-fitting lids. When putting out garbage on pickup days, to the best of your ability, only put trash in the bin provided by the Town and secure the lid. **Do not leave garbage outside in plastic bags overnight.** Clean up any food, garbage spills (and dead cicadas) immediately; and check the area around garbage containers regularly.

Effectively RODENT PROOFING your home necessitates sealing all ingress points through which a rat or mouse might squeeze, such as basement/foundation windows, walls, and wall joints. If possible, protect corner joints with sheet metal. Keep in mind that air, air conditioning, dryer and kitchen **vents are potential entrance points for vermin.** Vents should be examined to ensure that they fit tightly and are inaccessible. Ground-level vents, as well as pet doors, are particularly vulnerable; they especially should be metal, fit snugly and have no gaps larger than a quarter of an inch. Because of settling and open cracks, it may not be possible to make the older homes in Town air tight, but by curing the worst problems, the risk of serious infestation can be reduced greatly.

POPULATION REDUCTION relies on trapping and poisoning to thin out or eliminate a rat population. Traps can be either humane or killing, and are most effective in the home. **Killing traps must be placed out of reach of children and pets**; snap type traps big enough to kill a rat could injure a child or pet seriously. And, while humane traps themselves pose no danger, disposing of the trapped rat can be a problem. A rat becomes very aggressive when concerned and can deliver a nasty bite. Rats are surprisingly strong, fast and intelligent, and never should be underestimated. Jack Russell terriers, beagles and some cats are very efficient at hunting and killing rats. However, pet owners must be sure their animals are up-to-date on all vaccinations and shots. **Poisons are an option, but have two serious disadvantages.** First, they could be accessible to pets and children and are potent enough to kill both human and pets. Second, poisons kill very slowly. This means there is good chance the rats will die in their nest—which might be in the walls of your house. Decaying rats can lead to a major odor problem. Poisons only should be used by a professional exterminator who specializes in rodent control and carries liability insurance; and even then, it's best to think twice if children and/or pets are present.

For more information or to talk to a professional who specializes in rodent control, contact the Prince George's County Health Department, Environmental Engineering Program at **301-883-7681**. Four very useful brochures are available plus a check list of ways to lessen the likelihood of suffering a rat problem. All information may be downloaded from their website at:

<http://www.princegeorgescountymd.gov/sites/Health/Services/EnvironmentalHealth/RodentsWater/Pages/default.aspx>