

Keeping Your Cat Safe Outside
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We've been appalled by the recent cat mutilations in Aurora. Our sympathies go out to these cats and their owners. These terrible incidents illustrate how dangerous it can be for cats who are allowed to roam unsupervised. Better options for cats' safety and well-being is to allow only restricted or supervised outside time or keep cats totally indoors.

Our cat Buffett is allowed outside in our backyard because he cannot get out of the yard. At 11 years old, he's a bit too stiff to be able to jump our six-foot fence. The one place he could get out was at the gate, which has a horizontal crossbar he used to push off from and propel himself over the top. By covering the crossbar with a flat section of plywood, we took away his launching pad and secured the yard. Buffet loves to go out and play "tiger in the grass" by hiding behind bushes and pouncing out at our dogs.

A patented barrier system called Cat Fence-In can be installed along the top of any fence to keep a cat in the yard. Information about this product can be obtained on the web at www.catfencein.com or at 1-888-738-9099. Kritter Keepers, a company in Bailey, CO, (303-838-2632) builds custom outdoor enclosures for cats using cedar framing, 14-gauge welded wire and corrugated fiberglass roofing, providing an enjoyable but safe way for cats to enjoy the outside. Another type of enclosure is "Kittywalk", portable chew-proof wire-mesh arched tunnels that can be set up anywhere. You can attach as many tunnel sections together as you wish, although the basic system is 10 feet long. "Kittywalk" can be purchased from several pet catalogs, including Foster and Smith, at 1-800-826-7206.

If you decide to turn your indoor-outdoor cat into a strictly indoor cat, it's better to do so "cold-turkey" rather than gradually. If your cat meows to go outside, and sometimes you let him out and other times you don't, he will continue to pester to go out, because that behavior works for him some of the time. Intermittent reinforcement such as this is the very best way to create a cat who doesn't give up pestering. Completely ignore any of your cat's requests to be let out, and eventually he will stop asking. This could take several months however. Training your cat to walk on a leash and harness is another possibility to give him the chance to be outside.

In the meantime, make your cat's indoor environment more fulfilling for him. Bring in a small section of tree branch for him to scratch. Chances are you have plenty from the spring snow storm! See if you can interest your cat in a cat video. While we don't know exactly what cats and dogs perceive when they watch TV, they may at least be intrigued by the sounds or the changing images and colors. Your cat may enjoy one of several battery-operated toys that change direction whenever they encounter an obstacle.

Our cats are too dear to put them at risk with unsupervised roaming. So many other choices are available that can still allow cats to enjoy the outside if they want, or to create an enriched indoor environment that sufficiently meets your cat's behavioral needs.