Cats: Destructive Scratching

Why Do Cats Scratch?
It's normal for cats to scratch objects in their environment for many reasons:

- To remove the dead outer layers of their claws.
- To mark their territory by leaving both a visual mark and a scent - they have scent glands on their paws.
- To stretch their bodies and flex their feet and claws.
- To work off energy.

Because scratching is a normal behavior, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to direct the scratching onto acceptable objects and provide appropriate outlets.

Training Your Cat to Scratch Acceptable Objects

1. You must provide objects for scratching that are appealing, attractive, and convenient from your cat's point of view. Start by observing the physical features of the objects your cat is scratching.

   The answers to the following questions will help you understand your cat's scratching preferences:
   - Where are the objects located? Prominent objects, objects close to sleeping areas, and areas near the entrance to a room are often chosen.
   - What texture do they have – are they soft or coarse? Carpeted?
   - What shape do they have – are they horizontal or vertical?
   - How tall are they? At what height does your cat scratch?

2. Now, considering your cat's demonstrated preferences, substitute similar objects for her to scratch (rope – wrapped posts, corrugated cardboard, or even a log). Place the acceptable object(s) near the inappropriate object(s) that she's already using. Make sure the objects are stable and won't fall over or move around when she uses them.

3. Cover the inappropriate objects with something your cat will find unappealing, such as double sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sandpaper, or a plastic carpet runner with the pointy side up.

4. When your cat is consistently using the appropriate object, it may be moved. When moving, make sure to place the scratching object as close to your cat's preferred scratching locations as possible, like near your cat's sleeping areas or near the entrance of a room. Also make sure you move the object gradually over the course of several days/weeks.

5. Don't remove the unappealing coverings from the inappropriate objects until your cat is consistently using the appropriate objects in their permanent locations for several weeks, or even a month. They should then be removed gradually, not all at once.

Should I Punish My Cat For Scratching?
NO! Punishment won't change the behavior and may cause her to be afraid of you or the environment and may elicit defensive aggression. Used by itself, punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach your cat where to scratch instead. Rather, she'll learn to refrain from scratching in your presence but will continue to scratch when you're not around.

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How Do I Trim My Cat's Claws?
To help keep them sharp, cats keep their claws retracted except when they're needed. As the claws grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. You should clip off the sharp tips of your cat's claws on all four feet every week or so. There are several types of claw trimmers designed especially for pets. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets, fabrics, and skin. When trimming, only cut off the sharp tips, making sure to not cut into the pink portion of the cat's nail, as it will bleed and be painful for your cat.

If your cat is sensitive to having her nails trimmed, work on making good associations to having her feet messed with, by gently petting her legs and paws while giving her a treat. Build up to her tolerating her paws being handled. From there you can start to trim her nails, doing one nail at a time and then giving her a treat. Build up to doing all her nails on one foot and then all four feet. Don't push to do all four at once or you'll both have only negative memories of claw clippers. If at any time she does have an issue with her nails being trimmed, you have gone too fast.

Declawing?
We strongly discourage cat owners from having their cats declawed. Scratching is a natural behavior and instinct for cats and can be directed to appropriate items, such as a cat scratching post. Without the ability to claw, your cat may develop behavior problems that you have not previously experienced. However, if you feel that you must either declaw or give up your cat, we would rather see your cat stay in your home and be your lifelong companion. If you do decide to have your cat declawed, we suggest you have the surgery done at the same time she's spayed (or neutered if your cat is a male), that you only declaw the front paws, and that you **always** keep your cat indoors.

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