

# PENNYROYAL

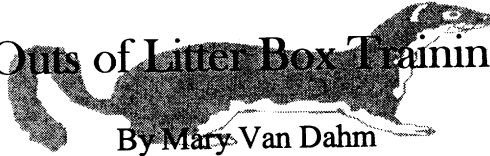
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## The Ins and Outs of Litter Box Training (for Ferrets)



By Mary Van Dahm

I often get calls from people whose ferrets leave them presents. Not nicely wrapped ones like you find under the Christmas tree; but plain brown parcels left in the corner, behind sofas, and sometimes out in the center of the room for the whole world to see! Let's face it, there are very few ferrets who are perfect about using the litter box. With a little effort, and a little insight as to why a ferret goes where it does, you can greatly increase his chances of hitting the right spot.

First of all, you must understand that ferrets are "latrine" animals. This means that they pick a spot, usually in a private corner somewhere, and return to that spot when they have to eliminate. They also have short legs and a low profile. To them a

room looks AWFULLY BIG and the closest corner looks SO inviting. Therefore, they may choose more than one corner in a room, or one corner in each room! Hopefully, as the more (ahem) intelligent species, we will realize their dilemma and provide them with extra litter pans as needed.

In some areas where litter pans won't fit, newspaper can be used. It may have to be taped down so the ferret realizes that it's not a toy to crawl under or rustle around in! You can also try putting old bread/baking pans or Tupperware-type dishes in spaces where regular litter pans won't fit. Whichever item suits your purpose, it is important to have the ferret realize that you are doing this for him to use. Placing a little feces

on the paper can sometimes help the ferret to understand what the paper is for. Sprinkle some old "used" litter over fresh litter in new or cleaned litter pans to remind your ferret that this is not a new sand box to play in. Show your ferret where his "approved" litter spot is and set him in it a few times, especially if he hasn't gone for a while, and keep setting him in it until he finally does relieve himself. Praise your ferret when he does the right thing. Give him a treat; but don't let him trick you! Some ferrets will learn the motion of backing into the pan and pretend that they go just so they can get the treat! Let them know the difference between the desired result and an empty pan.

large enough to extend out for about 8 inches or so on each side of the pan. At least if the ferret misses, he won't soil your carpeting!

Another way of keeping your ferret away from places where he shouldn't go is to spray the forbidden areas with rubbing alcohol or diluted lemon or grapefruit juice (5 parts water to 1 part juice). Most ferrets can't stand the smell of these products and will avoid treated areas. Since rubbing alcohol evaporates fast, you may have to apply it several times until your critter gives up. DO NOT use Bitter Apple for this purpose. It will work just as well, but the main purpose of Bitter Apple is to leave a bitter flavor when you spray it. Unless your ferret is chewing the carpet, you're just wasting the Bitter Apple. You may want to test the alcohol on your carpet in a small, unseen area first to make sure that it won't react with your carpeting and leave a stain. Most carpets won't have any problems, but it never hurts to be sure.

For litter problems inside the cage, limiting the ferret's open areas can generally help. Ferrets don't like to soil their bedding or food. Arrange the contents of the cage so all he has room for is food, bedding, and a litter pan. This can be done by either putting a larger pan in his cage, adding extra bedding to cover all the bare areas, or by putting the ferret in a smaller cage, temporarily, until he changes his habits. Once again, patience and perseverance are mandatory.

Some ferrets that have been really good with their litter boxes can suddenly stop using them. Assuming that it's not a medical problem where the ferret is losing control of his bowels, look to see if anything has changed in your house or in the ferret's daily routine. Have you moved the furniture? Is there a new pet or person in the house? Are you letting him out at a different time? All of these factors can change your ferret's habits. Most of the time, gently reminding him where the litter box is can be enough. Sometimes if

there is a new animal in the house, especially one that is also using the litter box, you may have to get an additional litter pan until your ferret gets used to the "intruder." Some ferrets refuse to share their pans and you may need to keep a separate pan for him on a permanent basis.

So that's the scoop on the poop! I've covered most of the frequently asked questions that I receive. If anyone has any problems or any other solutions to suggest, please call F.A.I.R. at 708-968-3189.

An important factor to realize is that ferrets have very short digestive systems. Approximately 3-4 hours after a ferret eats something, the undigested leftovers will exit the other end. Also, ferrets will often eat and then settle down for a nap. These naps will often last until the ferret is hungry again or until you come to wake him up. Waking the ferret will often trigger his body's need to eliminate, but in his excitement over seeing you and potential freedom, he suppresses this urge temporarily. If you know that your ferret ate at a certain time, or if he's been napping for a couple of hours, leave him in his cage until you see him use his litter box. If he seems reluctant to go and is more intent on you and getting out to play, walk away from him for a while and then come back and check his pan to see if he has gone in it. If he still hasn't done anything, use the "placing him in the litter box repeatedly" method and he should eventually get the idea. It is a good idea to set him in the litter box after he has been out for a while,

too. Younger ferrets will have to be reminded more often than older pets, but mature ferrets need reminders once in a while, too.

Don't punish your ferret. Ferrets do not relate having their noses rubbed in their feces with the fact that they missed the pan. All this action does is alienate your pet from you and may actually cause him to pick more unwanted spots since his desired spot has been ruled off limits. If he still doesn't cooperate, even though you've got wall-to-wall litter boxes, don't despair. There are still other things to try.

Some ferrets will seem to have the right idea and head to the corner with the litter box in it, only to go right next to the litter box! If it is a new pan that he has never used before, check to see if the sides of the pan are too high.

Usually it's not that they can't climb in, rather that you have formed a "false corner" and he is visualizing the side of the pan as part of the wall. You may want to cut down one side so he can see the litter. If it is a pan that he has used

before, but has suddenly stopped using, stop to think if anything has changed near the litter pan. Are you using a new litter that maybe he doesn't like? Once again, setting him in the box repeatedly should help him get the idea. If nothing has changed, then you may want to try a different litter. There are many new litters on the market that are acceptable for ferrets. Litter made from recycled newspaper or from biodegradable grain products are fine. Stay away from cedar shavings or "clumping" cat litters. Cedar has a resin that is stirred up in the dust from the litter. This can cause respiratory problems in ferrets. Clumping cat litters are often too dusty, too. Some ferrets like to dig their faces in it and they get it up their noses and into their eyes; causing irritation and sometimes infections.

If your schedule doesn't permit you the time to constantly keep tabs on your critter while you are trying to correct his habits, you can get pieces of plastic carpet runner and place a piece, under each pan, that is