

17/09/2019

Re: Cherry Gardens Allotment site – Battle

As requested I made a visit to the allotment site to investigate the reports of Rat activity. My first observations are that the site is located on the outskirts of the town adjacent to fields and has a ditch/water course along one of the boundaries there are also mature hedges and thick undergrowth. These are all part of the natural environment and ideal habitat for all rodent species including Rats.

With regard to the plot where Chickens are currently being housed, I did not see any evidence of rat activity either in or around the Chicken coup. There were no signs of burrowing to undermine the wooden structure nor were there any signs of gnawing, droppings or 'runs' to indicate that Rats had been making regular visit to the coup. However the wire frame work making up the outside area for the chickens has gaps that are more than wide enough for a Rat to access.

In order to deter Rat activity close to or in Chicken housing I would make the following suggestions:

- Provide food for the Chickens in appropriate feeders which do not allow the feed to spill or overflow on the ground inside the run
- Never scatter feed into the run
- Remove food sources from within the run overnight
- Store supplies of Chicken feed in metal containers with firmly fitting lids or covers
- Fix fine wire mesh with holes of less than 20 mm on the outside of any wire section of the run to prevent 'casual access'. This should be buried into the ground around the perimeter of the run to a depth of at least 150 mm and out from the edge of the run at least 300mm to prevent Rats undermining.

As far as the wider site is concerned I made a survey of the long boundary adjacent to the ditch/water course and found no firm evidence to suggest that a large Rat population was present in that area.

It is worth noting at this point that due to the nature of the site there are a large number of small timber structures and sheds all or any of which could provide harbourage for a small population of Rodents, either Rats or Mice. As mentioned earlier the site's location is within the natural environment and ideal habitat for all species of Rodents.

I am aware that there has been Rat activity and damage to crops has been reported. In my opinion this is not necessarily directly linked to the Chicken housing but is most likely a result of normal Rat foraging behaviour within their environment.

In such circumstances we are limited as to the options that are available to manage or control such activity. I would strongly advise NOT to use any form of Rodenticide poison on site for the following reasons;

Non target poisoning – Rats are not the only Rodents in the environment and all rodent baits are attractive to Rats, Mice, Voles and Shrews therefore there is a high risk of poisoning any and all of these species some of which have the benefit of legal protection. There is also the high risk of these Rodenticides making their way into the wild Bird populations either by directly consuming spilled baits or by Birds of Prey such as Barn Owls, Kestrels or Buzzards consuming Rodents which have consumed the poisons. An additional risk is that Cats and Dogs may consume poisoned Rodents.

Legal considerations – In recent times all Rodenticide poisons have undergone a legal review of their use and most are no longer licenced for use other than within or close to permanent buildings by professional users. Those baits which are available for 'amateurs' have also had the levels of active ingredient reduced to a very small dose which also increases the likelihood of non-lethal dosing and eventual genetic resistance. There are also restrictions on the statutory labelling of baits to prevent 'permanent baiting' making it a requirement to regularly review activity and remove baits if within 35 days if no new activity is present.

In that case it may be possible for individual plot holders to take some actions to reduce the likelihood of Rodent activity on or close to their plots;

- Regularly check sheds and structures for Rodent activity
- If activity is found within structures make prompt repairs and remove food sources from within
- Reduce 'cover' and harbourage on their plots and maintain good housekeeping
- Enclose vulnerable crops within a mesh enclosure with holes of less than 20 mm buried in the ground at least 150 mm and out from the enclosure at least 300 mm to prevent undermining

It may also be possible for individual plot holders to control small populations of Rodents by deploying suitable spring traps within structures and sheds. It is not advisable to set traps outside without them being with an enclosure to prevent trapping or harming non target wildlife or domestic pets.