

32 Tips on How to Resolve Pest Control Issues

by Mel Chandler

Anyone who owns or manages an apartment complex knows that bug and pest infestations are one of the most frustrating and vexing problems we have. Much of the “vexing” is the result of tenant actions. Most of the time, we call our pest management company. They send out a technician called a Pest Management Professional (PMP). These front-line people perform a service for which we pay a monthly service fee and receive a certain number of treatments. Since we are often not there when they come, we have our manager serve any necessary paperwork and notification and open the door when they arrive. The PMP should be an integral part of any successful pest management program and we do not even ask them any questions. Our problem is partly out of ignorance, and partly because it is inconvenient. The PMP is a wasted resource.

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There are things we can do to help ourselves, but because we are not experts and have no clue... little is done to solve the pest control problem. The PMP comes and goes, the problems temporarily abate and then continue and on and on the cycle goes. Here, I have created several self-help laundry lists so we, as property owners and people in the multi-housing industry, can develop an “Integrated Pest Management Program (IPMP).” It requires a team of individuals just like a sports team, each with their own part to complete. While much of the pest control problem is tenant-caused and may not be our “fault”, it is our problem. In this article, I have sought to offer specific tips and actions that are useful in pest control. It is not all-inclusive; many of these “tips” are common sense while some are surprising.

General Tips for Pest Control

- Instruct managers on your building cleanliness practices.
- Have any discarded food items or wrappers picked up immediately.
- Keep flowerbed and common areas clean and free of debris.
- Check garbage cans often for wet garbage or unsealed plastic bags that tenants may put there unauthorized, especially the laundry room or the mailbox cans, and, in the summer, the swimming pool area. Container lids should fit properly.
- If there are fruit trees, clean up or harvest fruit daily.
- Check flowerbed faucets or outdoor plumbing features, such as sprinkler systems for leaks, and report them so they can be repaired.

Tips for Gardeners

- Keep flowerbeds and common areas clean and free of debris.
- Keep plants well trimmed and not touching the building, if possible.
- Thin out plants so they do not provide harborage for rodents or insects.
- Keep trees well trimmed and away from buildings.
- Keep the sides of building or restricted areas clean and neat, cutting grass and weeds and picking up garbage. Tenants will often throw things out the windows, (i.e. beer bottles, clothing and other items).

Tips for Property Owners and Management Companies

- Fumigate several times if needed. Even fumigation does not totally kill every cockroach, as sometimes they may develop some immunity to certain poisons and some are so well hidden in their harborage, they may not even come out until the danger is over. Sometimes the strength of the chemical is regulated so our alternatives are less.
- Have your maintenance person caulk every little crevice, joint or wall space in the cabinets in the kitchen, bathroom, and closets. Pay careful attention to plumbing. Fill holes around plumbing

with copper mesh or steel wool. (This will keep pests from eating through your plaster or caulk repair). In a two-bedroom apartment, we will typically use 18-25 tubes of caulk and about two days of labor. Fortunately, this is a one-time event, but since there may be settling, earthquakes or the caulk may dry out and crack, it should be checked every time there is a vacancy. We typically go through the entire apartment carefully filling gaps between shelves and walls, sealing every joint and crevice, patching every wall or hole no matter how small. This also applies to cable and satellite connections. Left uncorrected, these places become super highways for invading pests. Caulking destroys any possible harborage or hiding place. It limits places where pests can safely lay eggs and hide and it can restrict access from one place to another within a group of cabinets or areas. If pests are there, by practicing what pest control professionals (PMP's) call "exclusion" (filling and caulking), you make your job easier. There is no place to hide; you detect problems quicker, identifying pests and problem areas which make your fumigation or other treatments more effective. Be aware that you may get a migration from one area to another if you spot treat an apartment or specific area.

- Since migration is possible if you treat one apartment, always make sure that before treating the designated apartment that the door is properly weather-stripped, and screens are in place. Targeted pests should not move next door.
- ***When tenants are uncooperative and notice has been given, ask your PMP to document their refusal or lack of preparation.*** We cannot over emphasize documenting problems because it is difficult for a PMP or independent contractor to go to court. Proper documentation and comments on service reports can demonstrate a lack of cooperation and influence the court in issues of habitability should an eviction or some other problem occur later. Take date-stamped pictures documenting unsanitary practices that result in pest problems. Ask your PMP to "gel" as an alternative, but do not expect immediate knockdown. Your PMP can also advise you on other alternatives. Some toxins require pests to return to their harborages and transport the toxins to their "friends and neighbors". Your PMP can help you develop an effective plan to reduce cockroach populations. Do not fault your PMP exclusively if the problem does not seem to abate. What you need is good advice and a team effort to achieve success.
- Just when you think everything is under control, a completely new population could be re-introduced by the tenant bringing in groceries from Mom and Pop stores in cardboard boxes, paper bags or by them picking up discarded furniture (not only upholstered furniture, but the glue used to put furniture together is a favorite cockroach food) or clothing (soiled clothing is a cockroach favorite) or a host of other ways.
- For sensitive areas such as food preparation areas or children, ask your PMP for alternative treatment plans. There are treatments available that are "approved" by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and various government agencies.
- A clean patio or porch area is important. If the tenant is putting their garbage out there because they do not want to visit the bin as frequently as they should, make sure that any container is covered with a properly fitting lid. Do the same with recyclables, like soda, beer and plastic containers, even newspapers. These are potential food sources for cockroaches. Empty beer or partially full beer bottles or cans are a smorgasbord for roaches. Mops and brooms, besides being unsightly, contain rich sources of food for cockroaches, and of course, BBQ grills are usually a huge offender. People seldom keep them clean.
- If there are children in your building, you might consider putting a metal garbage can with a tight fitting lid (attached with a chain or cable) and a sign requesting to replace the lid after use, next to the bin. Children are usually compliant with posted signs. Parents ask children to take out the garbage. They are unable to reach the top of the bin, so they merely leave it on the ground next to the bin. When the garbage collector comes, they may remove the bin from the area and tenants just toss their garbage nearby.
- Periodically check foundation vents. These can be broken and allow vermin or feral cats, wild creatures or dogs underneath your building causing flea infestations and occasionally a potent smell if one should die beneath your building. We once had a problem with neighbors kicking out the vents and putting out food to give feral cats a home. We solved the problem by having a welder make custom tamperproof vents. Cable installers or utility people often break or leave open vents.

Tenant Tips for Pest Control

Tenants are responsible for the behavior of their guests. If a tenant has houseguests, even if it is not overnight, they should inform them of your building rules and proper use of the facilities. This is for the protection of the tenant, as well as the community. Give the below list to each tenant as part of your House Rules.

In General

- Keep apartment entry door closed at all times, and windows screened.
- Wipe up any moisture in the kitchen or bath immediately.
- Report leaking faucets and plumbing problems immediately. Not reporting leaks could also result in excessive property damage to your apartment.
- When lining apartment shelving or drawers, always use bug treated paper. Do not use contact paper or newspaper. Roaches may actually feed on these items and find a place to hide and lay eggs around them.
- If you see discarded items or they are offered to you by a friend, such as clothes and furniture and decide you may be able to use it, beware that they may be infested with roaches and other bugs. Upholstered items and clothes are great homes for bugs. In wood furniture, cockroaches may also feed on the glue used to hold together most modern furniture. Be very careful.
- Dispose of garbage in the proper container, usually the bin. Do not put it in the laundry room or by the mailbox garbage cans since this will create problems for the entire community. Close the lid to the bin if possible.
- Common houseplants are frequently infested with bugs and flies due to over watering. You can buy treatments in your local hardware or drug store. However, continual moisture that soaks the carpet or floors can also present an ideal habitat for termites, an expensive problem not easily solved.
- Do not overfill closets and drawers and do not put dirty laundry in the closet on hangers or on the floor or in an uncovered container that is not airtight. Roaches can actually feed on the grime of your dirty clothes.
- Keep patios clean and neat. If you keep recyclables, keep them in an airtight, closed container. Roaches, wasps and ants love old beer and soda containers; they are their favorite foods.
- Avoid cardboard or paper packaging whenever possible. Roaches love to eat paper products, especially if they are soiled with food items.
- Carefully inspect purchased produce – one of the roaches favorite modes of transportation is onions and potatoes.
- Report pest infestations immediately upon discovery.

Conclusion

In summary, pest control is a team effort. We must recognize and correct the causes of pest problems. Work with your tenants, instruct your maintenance staff and managers, and consult with your PMP. An integrated approach actually works. If every team member is on the same page, we have an excellent chance of reducing pest populations as well as creating a good defense in court should the situation present itself.

Mel Chandler is a member of AOA and owns several rental properties throughout Southern California. Both Mel and his wife Sandra started out as managers for other property owners and after returning to California in 1998, purchased and now manage their own rentals. AOA thanks them for their contribution to this issue of the magazine.