



# Caregiver Tips: Providing Shelter

*This information has been provided by [Alley Cat Allies](#).*

Some colonies find shelter for themselves in a shed or under a building where their safety is uncertain. You might want to consider building a shelter for the cats. It can keep them safe from the elements and help you control their location and deter them from neighbors' properties.

A good size for a shelter is at least 2x3' and at least 18" high. Larger shelters are not necessarily better, since heat disperses quickly, leaving the inside as cold as the outside. A space just big enough for three to five cats to huddle is best. Cats generally use shelters during winter months more than others. Consider size for transport in your vehicle to and from the colony site as well. Camouflage the shelter as much as possible using dark green or brown paint. Anything that stands out could be mistaken for trash and could bring unwanted attention to the cats.



View examples of shelters at [www.alleycat.org/ShelterGallery](http://www.alleycat.org/ShelterGallery). Shelters are listed by ease of set-up.

## Tips

- Ask for scrap lumber from building supply stores or contractors, often available at little or no cost.
- Place an ad asking for used dog houses. This can net several free shelters that, with minor improvements, can be made suitable for cats (usually insulation needs to be added and the door made smaller).
- Host a shelter building party. Get together with other caregivers and/or your local feral cat organization's supporters to build the houses together. Contact a local Boy or Girl Scout or other youth organization and ask interested youth to complete a service project to help build shelters.

## Things to Keep in Mind

**Maintenance:** Shelters should be checked regularly to ensure their optimum quality and function. When deciding what kind of shelter to use, remember that some of the low-cost suggestions will need to be checked and replaced more frequently than some of the more permanent and professionally built shelters.

**Doorway:** Make sure that the door is big enough for cats only. The door should be 6-8" wide to keep out wildlife and larger predators. The opening should have a flap or an L-shaped entryway to keep cold air from blowing in. If neither option is possible, make sure the door faces away from prevailing winds or faces a wall. Some caregivers prefer shelters that have two doors so cats cannot be cornered.

**Protection from the Elements:** You can ensure that the cats are protected by making shelters waterproof, windproof (especially in cold climates), and elevated off the ground. Discarded pallets from shipping firms or hardware, farm supplies, or pet stores are a good option for elevation. The space beneath the shelters should be blocked from drafts. Insulation is a good material to use.

**Bedding:** Straw resists the wet and keeps a shelter warm, and is the best choice for insulation and bedding. Be sure to use straw—not hay—for feral cat shelters. Hay is used for animal feed—it draws and holds moisture, which you don't want in your cat shelter. Straw, the dry leftover stalks from harvested crops, repels moisture, making it ideal for keeping cats and other animals warm and comfy all winter long. Do NOT use blankets, carpeting, fake sheepskin, or any material that holds moisture. You can also use hardwood shavings (not cedar or pine), but keep in mind that softwood shavings are not suitable due to possible toxicity. Some caregivers in locations with long, cold winters use Mylar blankets as bedding. Mylar is a product that retains body heat. The generic term for Mylar is Polyester Film or Plastic Sheet. These sheets can be purchased from survival and outdoor stores as thermal safety blankets, or online at websites such as Amazon.ca.

**Camouflage:** Shelters should blend in with their surroundings, so that they are not obtrusive to neighbors. Cover them with leaves or other brush or paint them a dark color. Moving shelters into wooded areas away from buildings, parking lots, and other high-traffic areas is also a good idea for cat safety and to avoid neighbor complaints.

**Deter Wildlife:** Wildlife may decide to make their home in the shelters you provide for the cats. Reducing the shelter door to an opening 6" wide may solve this predicament. Do not use repellants because most of them will repel the cats as well. Some caregivers have resorted to providing additional shelters, accepting that some will be used by wildlife.