

Ferrets Running Wild In An Outdoor Holding Pen

How to easily create an outdoor holding pen that enriches your ferrets.

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Ferret Riley/© Courtesy Hannah Swears

Ferrets should only be allowed outside when secured by a leash or safe in a pen or other enclosure and always under supervision.

You can solve the twin problems of providing novel enrichment for ferrets and encouraging natural behavior — simply let your ferrets play outside. That's right, outside! After all, ferrets are domesticated polecats and polecats live in the wild, right?

Outdoor play areas must allow ferrets to play at will but still be contained and kept safe from outside dangers. Two basic strategies accomplish this: permanent and temporary.

Permanent outdoor enclosures include ferret runs, ferret-proofed gardens and fenced-off areas. These enclosures are generally excellent, but they have some of the same problems as indoor areas, namely that in the effort to make them ferret-proofed, they are often also made somewhat Spartan and boring. I have seen some outdoor enclosures that were essentially the equivalent of an empty swimming pool. Another problem is that the longer a ferret is in an enclosure, the greater the chance it can find a way out. Escapes can be of the type where a ferret finally figures the solution to get over the top, or digs a tunnel under the fence. A final problem with permanent enclosures is that some people cannot create one for any number of reasons, such as being renters or lacking an enclosable yard.

A temporary enclosure tackles the above problems, as well as addressing others, such as cost or portability. Most importantly, knocking together a temporary outdoor enclosure allows ferrets to experience the great outdoors almost anywhere, from your back yard to the local park. There are, of course, some disadvantages, but for the most part the enclosures work extremely well. Note that nearly everything mentioned about a temporary enclosure can be used to build or improve a permanent one as well.

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Temporary enclosures are composed of: 1) a holding pen; 2) food and water dishes; 3) hiding and sleeping dens; 4) play equipment; and 5) shadders. It is also useful to include a small stool or chair so you can sit within the enclosure and play with the ferrets as they run wild. Temporary enclosures can be built from a number of materials, but if you want to use them outdoors and expect them to hold up to weather and ferret mistreatment, heavier materials work better. The same can be said of the other items; you need good quality to stand up to Mother Nature, so get the best you can afford.

Materials For A Ferret Holding Pen

The holding pen for playtime is the most important aspect of a temporary outdoor ferret enclosure. It needs to be high enough to prevent the escape of leaping ferrets but as short as possible to save weight and materials. For my ferrets, 32 inches is high enough, but I can't guarantee it will contain your ferrets. Use the height of your own ferret barriers as your guide.

I make the walls of the temporary enclosure out of 14 inch plywood, although Masonite, particleboard or other materials are acceptable. Cut a 4 by 8 foot sheet of plywood into three 4-foot by 32-inch sections (most lumberyards will cut it for you for a small fee or free).

Use as many sections as you like, but I find that more than nine gets out of hand. Usually, I only use four to six sections, but I have used as few as two (to form a triangle against a wall) and as many as 12. I usually paint the sections with a good outdoor paint to help resist weather, dirt and ferret feces.

While there are a lot of ways to connect the sections, I use cinderblocks and bungee cords. The advantage of using cinderblocks, besides them being extremely cheap, is that they are very heavy and ferrets cannot move them. They are more than capable of holding up the wood panels and are heavy enough to prevent "push-by" escapes.

Assembling The Ferret Enclosure

To build the temporary ferret enclosure, first decide how many panels you need (the more you use, the larger the enclosure), and then collect the other materials based on the number of panels you use. You need a wood two-by-four, two eye hooks and tent stakes, a bungee cord, and six cinderblocks per panel, so multiply those amounts by the number of panels desired. Before you construct the enclosure, screw the eyehooks in place on the top edge, about a foot from each end. You can paint the panels (and cinderblocks) if you wish.

The first thing to do is to use the 4-foot wood beams to frame the playpen. I place them on edge and pin them in place with two tent stakes, one at each end. Then I place the panels in position against the two-by-fours and stack three cinderblocks on the outside of each panel end to lock them in place. I hook a bungee cord through an eyehook, pass it through a cinderblock, and attach it to the opposite eyehook to hold the corners in place.

If put together properly, the staked wood beams hold the inner edge of the panel in position, the bungee cords hold the top corners tight, and the cinderblocks add stability and weight. The resulting enclosure is stable and fairly ferret-proof.

I do not use hinges nor attach the panels to each other in a permanent or fixed manner. This is because attached panels require level ground, otherwise gaps and holes are created that entice a ferret to escape. Short, individual panels naturally overlap each other and "self-level," allowing the bottom edge to seat better on the ground. The two-by-fours also help hide gaps and work marvelously for holding the panels in place.

Inside The Ferret Holding Pen

Regardless of the amount of time a ferret spends in an outdoor enclosure, it is critical that a source of water be provided. I provide at least two water dishes and at least one water bottle per holding pen.

Unless your ferrets are going to spend a long time outside, the need for food is minimal. A single small dish of food is enough, but toss out the food at the end of the day to prevent possible contamination to indoor food.

I always add enough nest boxes so there is more than enough room if all the ferrets want to sleep. Be careful that your ferrets cannot push the boxes to the edge of the holding pen, allowing them to escape. Pin the boxes in place with tent stakes if necessary.

To increase interest, I usually hide a number of food treats in the enclosure before tossing in the ferrets. They now expect small food treats, so as soon as they hit the ground, they are off looking for snacks. This usually degenerates into a wrestling free-for-all and extended play.

The final thing to think about is shade. Direct sunlight can rapidly overheat your ferrets. Even if they take refuge in a nest box, direct sunlight can turn their bedrooms into tiny ovens.

Create shade by sticking a few umbrellas into the ground, covering one end of the enclosure with a tarp, or just making sure there are a number of shade plants inside the pen. For hot days, limit outdoor time to early morning, or add a cooling mister to lower the temperature of the interior of the cage.