

# Sharing your garden with possums

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Possums have been able to thrive in urban Adelaide because of easy access to food and water. By supplementing naturally occurring hollows with wildlife boxes, providing local native food plants and retaining patches of remnant vegetation, you are sustainably supporting these extraordinary suburban neighbours.

## Possums in Adelaide

Today, there are only 2 species of possum you're likely to see in urban Adelaide – the common brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) and the smaller common ringtail possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*). These species have adapted to urban living, and use trees to minimise threat from cats, dogs and foxes that ground dwelling native mammals often face.

The common brushtail possum is a large (1.5-4.5 kg) solitary possum with prominent pointed ears and a bushy black tail. Although common brushtail possums may be frequently encountered in some urban areas, they are threatened in South Australia under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*. In South Australia, brushtails are considered a species of conservation concern, meaning they are vulnerable to becoming endangered.

The common ringtail possum is a smaller (less than 1 kg) and more sociable possum, with small, rounded ears with white patches, and a thin tail with a white tip which has the ability to grip branches.

## Threats

Reduced and disconnected natural habitat due to extensive land clearing for development is the greatest threat facing these and many other native animals. Within highly modified environments such as the suburbs, other threats include introduced predators (dogs, cats and foxes), motor vehicles, electrical transformers atop stobie poles and a lack of natural hollows or "dens".



Ringtail possums (Photo: Martin Stokes).

A number of these threats can bring residents into conflict with possums, particularly the common brushtail possum.

Responsible pet ownership can help to reduce threats. Ensuring dogs and cats are confined overnight (in secure runs or inside) is safer for possums and many other native animals. This will also reduce the level of noise associated with any nocturnal visits.

## Habitat requirements

Possums have most of their food, water and shelter requirements met by their tree-based homes. Common brushtail possums will occasionally venture to the ground to feed, however ringtails rarely move down from the safety of trees.

Both species are mostly leaf-eaters in the wild, although urban gardens have allowed them to significantly expand their dietary range to include many fruits, vegetables, and ornamental shrubs.

Common brushtail possums are particularly flexible in their diet which may extend to raiding compost bins, eating insects, bird seed or leftover pet food.

## Wildlife hollows

Common brushtail possums are obligate hollow users, which means they cannot survive without hollows, so the protection of a 'den' by day is essential. Natural hollows in eucalypts can take hundreds of years to develop and possums would usually use four to six hollows across its territory.

Unfortunately, natural hollows are now in short supply across most of the city and metropolitan area. As a result, common brushtail possums frequently take up residence in roofs or sheds.

Many people now consider them a nuisance, but simple steps like blocking external access can reduce the likelihood of a possum moving in.

Installing a wildlife box can provide alternative shelter that may reduce the likelihood of them taking up residence in your home or shed.

The smaller common ringtail possum typically makes its own leaf-nest, called a drey, in dense vegetation. It may shelter in hollows or roofs, particularly during winter, but it does so less frequently than common brushtail possums.

## Native plants

Local native plants provide important sources of food and shelter for native animals. This is especially true in winter when many introduced species are dormant and when other food may be scarce. Most hollows are formed in eucalypts, so it is essential these trees are retained wherever possible in a suburban setting.

Leaves make up the largest part of a possum's diet. Planting native species preferred by possums, such as banksias and hakeas, is likely to assist by providing a more balanced diet and reducing their impact on other garden plants.

## Artificial feeding

The availability of food is one of the main reasons for possum densities becoming higher in some urban locations. This tends to happen in city parks and gardens where possums are artificially fed or have access to the organic waste we discard.

High numbers of common brushtail possums can cause conflict between the possums, pets, and people. Reducing access to pet food and open compost bins can help to discourage possums.

## Wildlife friendly gardening

In Australia, gardening has been recognised as one of our favourite pastimes but what we do in our home gardens has the potential to benefit or harm the natural environment.

By developing and maintaining a garden that follows the 5 basic wildlife friendly gardening principles, you will reduce your maintenance costs, the threat of invasive environmental weeds, and contribute to a better local environment with habitat that helps to conserve our local flora and fauna.



*Common brushtail possum*

*(Photo: Jesse Fagan CC BY-NC 4.0).*

## Top 5 tips

1. Use plants native to your suburb.
2. Plant species that are a range of heights.
3. Select a mix of local native plants to provide flowers throughout the year.
4. Manage your pets responsibly.
5. Minimise chemical use.

Together we can work toward a cooler, greener, wilder Adelaide.

Scan to discover a range of gardening resources, including a list of native plant nurseries, on the Green Adelaide website.



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