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By Mariel Garza

Who let the cats out? An idea blossoms at Flower Mart

A few years ago, the Flower Mart in downtown Los Angeles had an unpleasant problem: Large rats with a fondness for red carnations roamed the two warehouse buildings, terrorizing tenants and customers. "We tried everything from big traps and the glue traps to even more inhumane ways," said Scott Yamabe, general manager of the Los Angeles Flower Mart.

But nothing worked for long

Enter the cats.

A colony of feral, or wild, cats placed at the mart by an animal rescue organization immediately drove out the rats. Since then, the cats have taken up permanent residence, an arrangement that has worked out well for both the mart and the cats.

The relationship began 3 ½ years ago, when Melya Kaplan, founder of Venice Animal Allies Foundation, an animal rescue organization, stopped by to chat with a mart worker one day. As someone who worked finding permanent homes for abandoned or undomesticated wild cats, Kaplan came up with an idea to solve two problems.

She convinced Yamabe to try out some cat tenants, with the understanding that she would take them all away if they didn't work out. Kaplan said all the cats – which number about 20 at the various mart locations – came from shelters where they would have likely been euthanized, since feral cats are considered unadoptable because of their human-shy nature.

"We wouldn't want to place domestic cats because people take them," Kaplan said. Domestic cats make friends with people and forget why they are there. "We don't want people to play with cats. They are there to do their job."

The cats have names such as Attitude and Frankie, since he's the king of the mart's anti-rat pack.

They have displaced the rats, but not by catching and killing them – although Yamabe acknowledged that a few rat-less tails have been discovered since the cats moved in. Rather, it's the "eau du cat" odor that drives the rat to find safer territory.

So far, the living arrangements, have worked out just fine, Kaplan and Yamabe said. "(It's fine) as long as tenants don't complain and as long as cats aren't eating the flowers," Yamabe said. "Then we may have to bring in dogs."