

Zodiac's Product
Roundup:

Food & Water Containers



Zodiac provides a ferret's perspective on the best ways to hold food and water.

By Erika Matulich, Ph.D., and Zodiac The Ferret

Hil! This is Erika, Zodiac's mom. I will try to insert some common sense into this discussion, because Zodiac has imaginative ideas about containers.

Water and food are the basic essentials of life, and a good, safe container for these items is equally essential. Many lovely containers exist, but those made from some plastics release chemicals into their contents, and ceramic glazes could contain unsafe lead.

Choose containers that are easily washable or, even better, dishwasher-safe. Keeping food and water containers clean is necessary for the health of your ferret.

Containing Cuisine

Yahoo! Who cares about ferret food? The most fun thing to do with ferret food (when I am done eating it, of course) is to dig it out of the bowl. Nothing is more satisfying to us ferrets than letting the food fly!

Food-flying is a speed event, and faster is better. I have a winning technique guaranteed to get the attention of the human judges. You should dig like crazy with your front paws and

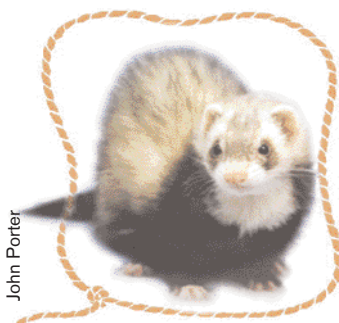
also snorkel into the food with your nose and flip your head back. The food will fly faster!

Yes, ferrets love to dig. If they haven't already dug up a houseplant or their litter box, a food bowl is the next best thing. The key to a food container is that it actually retains the food. Not only do ferrets like to dig at the food; they also like to tip over containers.

A variety of techniques can prevent tipping and some digging. Secure the food container to the side of the cage with bungee cords or clips. Some containers lock onto cage bars with an easy twist (a nice plus for use with travel carriers).

The first food container I bought for a ferret was a two-sided plastic container meant for cats. The dishes were gently sloped for easy eating, and I put food in one side and water in the other. What a disaster!

The container was lightweight enough to push all over the floor, causing spills and splashes. The gently sloped sides of the dishes made for fantastic digging potential, and it didn't take long before much of the food was over in the water side. Ferret food soup was everywhere! When enough



Hi! My name is Zodiac, and I'm a ferret who lives with my mom and dad (the humans) and a ton of other ferrets. Mom thinks that we are going to talk about food and water containers. Little does she know how many other great things you can do with such containers. I am an exceptionally creative ferret and always find new uses for everyday household containers. Food and water? How mundane!



Many ferrets enjoy digging in their food bowl. To prevent this, provide your ferret with a digging box.

was all over the floor, the container was easy to poke a nose under and tip upside-down.

My replacements for the cursed cat container were heavy ceramic bowls. I selected bowls especially made for pets, as I knew the glaze would be safe for food or water consumption. These bowls are too heavy to tip, but Gus, my strong male ferret, does shove them around the floor if he thinks that they are in the wrong location. The best bowls come with an extra lip overhanging the inside edge to minimize spillage from an enthusiastic ferret.

Again, make sure that food con-

tainers are dishwasher-safe. Ferret foods have high fat content that causes residue inside bowls. This residue quickly becomes rancid, so containers should be washed often. I wash mine weekly.

Mom and Dad went away for the weekend without taking me along. How unfair! Don't they know that I deserve a vacation from this rat race? Well, I'll show them. The first thing I'll do is dig up all my food. Hey! Look at this new food thingie. When I dig in it, more and more food magically appears. What a keen toy!

Another special kind of food container is the "J" feeder or reservoir feeder. This type of feeder is great if you are away for an extended weekend, because the feeder provides extra storage capacity for additional food. These feeders should lock onto the side of the cage and provide a continuous flow of food into the cup. An enthusiastic ferret could keep digging and empty the whole thing, but if that happens, the ferret can eat the food from the floor.

Some reservoir feeders come with timers so that only certain amounts of food are exposed or delivered according to a time setting. Although these feeders are appropriate for dogs and cats, they are not good for ferrets. Ferrets are "free feeders" and need to

have constant access to their food. They have extremely high metabolisms and eat every few hours throughout the day and night. [Some people believe that ferrets don't require free-feeding. Talk with your veterinarian to decide what's best for your ferret. — Eds.]

You can reduce digging in a food container by channeling the digging instinct elsewhere. Try using a rice box (for details, see the article on litter and litter boxes in the May/June 2004 issue of FERRETS), and your ferret may forego flinging the food.

Wonderful Water Weasels

It's summertime! Just perfect for a ferret day at the beach. What? You don't have a beach near your house? No problem — just visit the nearest water bowl, and go for a nice snorkel! You can even simulate swimming with your front paws in a water bowl.

Ferrets prefer to drink out of water bowls. Scientific studies have shown that ferrets drink more water out of bowls than out of water bottles, presumably because it's easier. Water bowls, however, are much messier than water bottles and can be less sanitary. Ferrets love to play in water bowls and may dig, splash and snorkel.

Misty and Zodiac are my best snorkeling ferrets; they stick their entire heads in the water and wave around while blowing bubbles. Sasha and Gus have to "dig" at the water while drinking and splash it everywhere. Little Bear thinks that water tastes better out of the bowl and tries to tip it over to lap up water from the spill. Thor dribbles food crumbs into the water, which means that I have to change water bowls several times per day.

Again, heavy crock-type bowls are helpful in reducing tipping. Don't get a bowl that's too large, because that presents a potential drowning hazard. Dishwasher-safe is best, because these bowls should be washed weekly, even if water is changed daily.

Water Drip Catchers

Whee! That was fun. I just finished snorkeling and digging in my water bowl, so now every drop of water is either on the floor or on me. Such fun! Mom thoughtfully provided me with an extra bowl and a water bottle.

How Many?

What is the right number of food and water containers for your ferret? The goal is to always have a backup. Ferrets can go into physical stress within three hours without water and six hours without food.

Water bottles can go dry or get clogged, and bowls can be spilled. For this reason, provide at least two water sources for a single ferret and more for multiple ferrets.

My rule of thumb for multiple ferrets is for every three ferrets past the first one, I provide another water source and another food source. I like to mix types (water bottles and water bowls, food bowls and food feeders).

It's too bad you can't snorkel with a water bottle!

Because bowls can be tipped and leave ferrets without water, I also provide water bottles. I find that water bottles invariably make things wet with drips. Mushy food and soggy bedding are no fun for you or your ferret. To keep things drier, I place a bowl beneath each water bottle to catch drips and anchor it with a small bungee cord. This helps keep everything dry and clean.

Water bottles should be changed regularly; every few days is great. Wash the bottle and its parts thoroughly on a weekly basis to prevent bacteria from growing on them. Some water bottles come with a brightly colored plastic "float" ball that helps you determine the level of the water. Discard these balls; I had to have one surgically removed from a ferret's stomach after it was accidentally swallowed. Check the rubber fittings on the water bottle to make sure that these are not deteriorating, and clean the metal spout thoroughly each week.

Other Water Sources

Grandma just got me a fountain to play in. What a great present! Running water makes me bounce. I try to stop it, bite it, grab it and snorkel it, but it just keeps running! I'll bet I can play all the water away in just a day.

Many ferrets are fascinated by water, especially water in motion. My mother bought Zodiac an expensive pet water fountain that circulated and filtered a large water supply so we could be gone for the weekend. Zodiac had such fun playing with the running water that she managed to splash two gallons of water onto the floor. We removed the fountain and gave it to the cats, much to Zodiac's disgust. Our next plan for Zodiac is to try a waterer with a reservoir of standing water.

If your ferret's water sources are stale or dirty, it may seek other sources to quench its thirst or simply for fun. This may put your ferret at risk. Keep all toilet seats down at all times! A ferret can climb or jump into a toilet bowl, but it is difficult to jump out.



John Porter

Dishwasher-safe containers are the easiest to maintain. Be careful to keep curious critters out of the dishwasher.

Danger lurks elsewhere, too. Zodiac loves to jump into a wet bathtub to lap up the drops but can't get enough purchase to jump out. Gus

wants to play with water in the dishwasher, but dishwashers are ferret killers. Check carefully before you start your dishwasher or clothes



John Porter

A bowl that is too big may entice a ferret to sleep in it, rather than eat or drink from it.



Get water bottles with wide mouths to make cleaning easier.

washer. I once came into the kitchen to find Sweet Pea with her head stuck down the garbage disposal, trying to lick water.

A Constant Location

While Mom and Dad were away for the weekend, the ferret-sitter came to take care of me. Although I am perfectly old enough and responsible

enough to take care of myself, Mom worries that I might dig up all my food or drain all my water, so she arranges for someone to check on me. I don't like the sitter very much because she isn't smart enough to know where my bowls go. She always puts them in the wrong place, and then I have to work really hard to move them where they ought to go!

Ferrets are creatures of habit and prefer that their containers be kept in the same location. When you wash or replace a container, try to put it in the same place or your ferret may decide not to eat or drink out of it.

Selecting the right location for food and water containers is essential. Ferrets are naturally clean animals and prefer to drink and dine as far as possible from their bathroom. Keep this in mind, and don't put these containers near or next to the litter box, if at all possible. Always separate food and water containers to keep the water clean.

Other Clever Container Categories

I told you about food-flying and snorkeling games with containers, but there are many other creative uses for them. I use them as a litter box, a sleeping area and a play area!

Occasionally, a ferret may use a food container as a litter box. In this case, thoroughly clean the container, and attempt to remove the odor by soaking it in a 10 percent bleach solution. Rinse and dry thoroughly before putting food in it again. You don't want the ferret to smell the odor and decide that the food container should continue to be a litter box!

To further discourage ferrets from using food containers as a litter box, choose round bowls. Ferrets like to "go" in corners, so round bowls are

Bottled Or Tap – Which Water Is Best?

The National Resources Defense Council conducted a four-year study and tested more than one thousand samples of bottled and tap water. Its 1999 conclusion was that "There is no assurance that just because water comes out of a bottle it is any cleaner or safer than water from the tap. And in fact, an estimated 25 percent or more of bottled water is really just tap water in a bottle — sometimes further treated, sometimes not."

Case Western Reserve University and Ohio State University conducted another test in 2000 and concluded that all 61 samples of bottled and tap water were safe to drink according to government standards, but that bottled water had more bacteria and tap water had more fluoride and chlorine. Researchers Dr. James Lalumandier and Dr. Leona W. Ayers concluded that "use of bottled water on the assumption of purity can be misguided."

Under new right-to-know provisions in the drinking water law, all tap water suppliers must provide annual water-quality reports to their customers. To obtain a copy, call your water company or check online at www.epa.gov/safewater/dwinfo.htm. For those of you using well, spring or delivered water, there are certified drinking water laboratories in virtually every state that can test the water. Contact your state drinking water program or the EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline (800 426-4791 or hotline-sdwa@epa.gov) for a list of contacts.

If you want to take extra precautions, you can purify your water with filters, reverse osmosis systems, distillation and so on. There are various pros and cons to each method as well as cost considerations. If you decide to use a filtration system, be sure to purchase filters certified by NSF International (www.nsf.org). It is critically important that all filters be maintained and replaced at least as often as recommended by the manufacturer, or they might make the problem worse by growing bacteria. For more information about drinking water issues, visit www.cyber-nook.com/water/.

If you think that the water you drink is safe enough for you, it is safe enough for your ferret. Find out more about the water you drink, however, and don't make any assumptions.

less likely to be seen as a litter box. Keep the ferret's regular litter box clean, so there won't be a temptation to find a cleaner bathroom.

Containers can be a constant source of fun for ferrets. Some ferrets like to bob for raisins or ice cubes in bowls of water. Others like to push around upside-down bowls on smooth floors. I put pingpong balls in big bowls and let the ferrets roll the balls around in the bowl.

If the bowl is very large and made out of plastic, you can turn it upside-down and cut a "door" in the side. This makes a dandy sleeping den for your ferret. Even right-side up, I have found many ferrets like to sleep in bowls. The round shape seems to cuddle up just right for the ferrets that like to sleep donut-style. A larger bowl lined with a piece of fleece or terrycloth can make a comfortable, secure snoozing area for your ferret. You can even suspend these bowls from the top of the cage for extra sleeping room.

See? I told you that containers are good for lots more than just holding food and water. Any good ferret knows how to have multiple uses for bowls, crocks, pans and bottles. Ferret container creativity makes life fun!

I hope our information on containers will help you select those that work best for you and aren't too much fun for your ferrets! 🐾

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Erika Matulich is a professor at the University of Tampa in Florida and the former president of the Ferret Lovers' Club of Texas. She is a Certified Small Animal Specialist by the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council. She is a frequent contributor to *Ferrets*, *Ferrets USA* and *Critters USA* magazines and was the contributing ferret editor for *Pets.com*. Matulich is the proud owner of six ferrets.

Kodiak's Precious Zodiac Bear is a sable mitt sprite and daughter of Precious (dam) and DAF Kodiak Bear (sire). She was born at Bandit's Beggars and Thieves in Texas. Her hobbies include pandemonium, weasel work and busybody business, accompanied by intense treat begging, sock stealing and human training.