



Keeping Cats Safe in the Garden

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Holly Aguirre | March, 2015

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If you've been a cat owner for some time, there's a good chance that you've known the heartbreak that comes from losing a cat. While some felines are content to laze in the sun, others cannot resist the temptation to wander over the garden wall. Indeed, curiosity has killed many a cat.

Keeping a cat safe in the garden is directly related to your ability to keep your pet there.



"Cats left unattended face tremendous risks including wandering off, getting hit in traffic, confrontations with other pets or predators and being harmed by non-cat-loving humans," said Dr. Cindy Houihan, feline veterinarian/owner of [The Cat Practice](#) in Birmingham, Michigan. "We know cat families who keep their cat in the yard by putting on a harness and leash, building screened-in cat enclosures and installing an electronic fence."

It's important to engage your cat in activity, provide toys, plant perennials such as catnip and most important, have them spayed or neutered. Keep in mind that cats are nocturnal by nature; the busier they are in the day, the better you'll sleep at night.

Think like a cat and make the garden a place they want to hang out with lots of options. Cats like chairs, shade, running water, jumping, pouncing and seeing. The more opportunities for activity the less likely they will be to stray.

When it comes to keeping your cats safe outside, consider the lilies, literally. Dr. Jami-Lyn Derse founder of [Veterinary Housecall Care](#) in Chicago cautions her cat owners to never keep lilies in their home or garden.

"Tiger lilies, Easter lilies, stargazer lilies, oriental lilies, and daylilies all can cause kidney failure," Dr. Derse says. "Cats can develop toxicity from eating any part of the plant and even from getting pollen on their fur."

The toxic component of lilies is absorbed and filtered by the kidneys where the problem occurs causing the kidneys to shut down and can ultimately cause death if not treated early and aggressively. Symptoms of toxicity also include vomiting, lethargy and anorexia.

Dr. Gaylord Brown, Chief Vet of [Delta Rescue](#) in Los Angeles said that he has seen more than his fair share of cat deaths by lilies.

"The entire lily plant is toxic to cats," said Dr. Brown. "However, in regards to sheer numbers, pets are poisoned much more often by the use of the common garden product metaldehyde, snail bait, which can cause deadly seizures in both dogs and cats."

Brown sugar is added to the poison to attract the slugs, which also tempts your pet. Instead of poison there are many natural ways to deter or kill slugs. Seaweed used as mulch, for example, is a natural deterrent as well as strips of copper placed around pots. Consider watering in the early morning as slugs come out at night seeking moisture. Slugs also love beer and they're not picky about the brand. Pour half a can of the cheap stuff into a dish and place about the garden. You'll find them drunk and half-dead in the morning.

Dr. Houihan says that her office has also treated many cases of severe gastritis in cats. Daisies, lilies, daffodils, holly, ferns, many forms of ivy and many other plants can cause skin irritation, gastrointestinal upset or organ damage. (See the list at [The Cat Practice](#).)

"Cats self-groom by licking wherever they can reach including their paws. So anything they step in could be ingested," said Dr. Houihan. "I have had a few patients develop life-threatening anemia from ingesting rat poison."

By frequently walking the grounds of your garden, checking for foreign objects, insect nests, garden tools or other sharp objects can help keep your kitty safe. Also remember that kitty is low man on the predator totem pole.

"Predators, of course, vary based on where you live in the U.S., but could include hawks, coyotes, wolves, foxes and wild dogs," says Dr. Houihan. "Also look out for venomous spiders, toads, snakes and lizards that may be indigenous to your area."

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