



Outdoor Options for Feline Friends

Safe Ways to Let Them Explore

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While some cats are content to stay indoors, others want to go outside. Even if they remain in the yard, letting them out without a plan can put them in danger. Gently managing a cat's outdoor experience can instead ensure a consistently safe, enjoyable time without worry or compromising its freedom. A few guidelines will help.

Make the Garden Safe

Cats love to chew on greenery, so set up a small pot or two or a small flat of grasses. Most cats enjoy munching on oat or wheat grasses and relish treats of fresh catnip and catmint. Marigolds can repel fleas and basil will both ward off mosquitoes and complement family meals.

Many plants can be toxic. Veterinarian Jane Brunt, executive director of the nonprofit CATalyst Council, in Annapolis, Maryland, advises: "Make sure the plants in your garden are safe, in case your cat is tempted to taste anything. Say no to foxglove and lily species, since they're poisonous to cats."

Find an extensive list of both safe and problem plants at Tinyurl.com/ASPC-ToxicPlantGuide. Note that aloe vera, asparagus fern, philodendron, dieffenbachia, tomatoes and many varieties of ivy are also among species that can cause consequences ranging from an upset stomach to kidney failure and even death, if ingested.

Protect from Predators

"Never leave a cat outdoors unattended," says Dr. Cindy Houlihan, owner of The Cat Practice, in Birmingham, Michigan. "During the day, problems can include stray cats, hawks or loose dogs. Another danger is the movement of foxes, raccoons, coyotes and owls close to urban areas where the food supply is more plentiful. Elderly cats are particularly prone to harm. An enclosure is the best way to keep a cat safe outdoors."

Paris Permenter and John Bigley, bloggers at CatTipper.com, an online magazine for cat lovers, built a "catio" for daytime use by their felines. Located in Cedar Park, Texas, their four rescue cats need protection from coyotes. "It's attached to our house, like a small screened porch," explains Permenter. "The cats use an open window that's fitted with a cat flap for access; we also have a human-sized screened door, so that we can go in to clean the room. It's enriched their lives and given a former community cat a better home, as well."

In Wheat Ridge, Colorado, Jane Dorsey, volunteer coordinator for the Cat Care Society, utilizes "habicats" both at the shelter and at home. Because her first cat, Chessie, was an escape artist, Dorsey decided to use a large dog pen (12 feet long by six feet tall) as an enclosure. Stood on end, it attaches to the house and has a weatherproof panel roof. A cat door leads to the kitchen. "Chessie's personality improved because she was able to decide when to go in and out. For easy cleanup, we used pavers for flooring."

In lieu of safe garden access, experts suggest likewise setting aside a small area inside any enclosure for a pot of plants. Also, pet tents made by Sturdi Products and Kritter Kommunity facilitate more portable enclosures.

Houlihan finds that, "In case of a sudden change in weather, the cat can avoid heat stroke or a scary storm." Then there's the live entertainment factor: "Cats love vertical space, so a cat tree or actual tree limb, properly anchored, can let him have a better view of birds, lizards, toads, chipmunks and squirrels without harming them," she says. "It's like kitty television."



Go for a Walk

A mesh-enclosed stroller allows a cat to ride in safety while the walker burns calories. In case of a sudden noise or loose dog, the cat can't escape. Houlihan also recalls a patient called Uti (pronounced YOU-tee), that was prone to chewing electrical cords. "His owners now take him outside for a daily stroll; he's no longer bored and has quit chewing."

Adopted from a local shelter as a kitten, Makai also goes for accompanied walks. Due to heavy traffic near their Baltimore, Maryland, row home, Andrea Martin, a manager with Brand Public Relations, and her husband Nick, use a harness and leash to take her outside. "We often get the, 'You're taking your cat for a walk?' look," relates Martin, but that hasn't stopped this adventurous team. "She likes taking a break from being indoors," she explains. Make sure the harness fit is tight enough so the cat can't wiggle out of it.

With proper planning, any kitty can safely enjoy the great outdoors and the sun on its back.

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