

Behaviour matters

Cat-friendly garden planting ideas – part two

Having planned out the various design features in the previous article, it's now time to look at planting ideas! Gardens can easily be designed to meet both your needs and those of your moggy. Even if you have a paved back garden or are in rented accommodation, you can still introduce cat-friendly gardening concepts, such as planting catmint in pots, to make your outside space a more inviting place for your cat to spend their time.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!

Planting often starts with considering colour schemes for your garden. While cats do not have great colour vision and mostly see in shades of grey, they can see blue and a greenish yellow, which isn't dissimilar to the colours of the Cats Protection logo! It's unclear whether cats are drawn to these particular colours or not, but generally movement is more important to cats than



PHOTO: BOTTOM LEFT & RIGHT: DAVID MANNERS

Left: Humphrey using *Stipa tenuissima* as a hidey hole



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colour. As hunters, their eyes are perfectly adapted to detect the slightest movements of rodents. Cats love the swaying motion of long ornamental grasses to hide in and play.

Garden designer, Cats Protection Advisory Council member and volunteer branch coordinator, David Manners, advises: "There are many types of ornamental grasses but New Zealand hairy sedge (*Carex comans*) 'Frosted Curls' is as tough as old boots and cats love to crawl under it on sunny days, or may use it as a launch pad when leaping out on their fellow felines or us! They seldom seem to nibble it either. Another good 'hard as nails' architectural plant is New Zealand flax (*Phormium spp*). Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*) is a hardy perennial grass that self-seeds easily and seems to be popular as a hiding place."

Au naturel catnip

Cats are renowned for their love of catnip despite the fact that only around 50-70% of cats actually react to catnip. Catmint (*Nepeta cataria*) and valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) which produces a similar effect to that of catmint,

are commonly available in garden centres. Both plants produce pretty flowers which are popular with pollinators. In order to prevent an overly exuberant cat from maiming and destroying young plants, try covering it with an upturned, sturdy, metal mesh hanging basket



Valerian has a similar effect to catmint

and use tent pegs to secure it to the ground. While the effects of catnip are relatively short lived, it may be advisable to avoid planting it in front gardens close to a road.

Shade and privacy

As well as creating structure and interest, planting trees, shrubs and hedges provides excellent shady spots for cats to keep cool and offers them privacy. Create wildlife interest using shrubs like buddleias to attract butterflies and other pollinators. Runner bean wigwams are easy to grow and fun for young families as well as providing a secret hideaway for your cat. Shade is especially important for white cats, which are more prone to sunburn. Evergreens are fantastic for year-round shade and provide protection from bad weather. A more exotic looking evergreen is *Fatsia japonica* with its broad leaves which can be used to create cover.

One area where cats particularly need some privacy and shelter is by the cat flap so that they can carefully observe their territory and look out for any potential threats as they step outside. Ideally, offering free access to the garden via a microchip cat flap set into an opaque lower half of the back door can help to maintain the house as a 'safe fortress' from your cat's perspective. Outside, this is where the use of strategically placed potted evergreen shrubs, such as box (*Buxus*), can be invaluable to your cat's sense of security. However, just as a word of caution, these do need to be carefully monitored to ensure that a neighbourhood enemy is not using the cover to ambush your unsuspecting cat. ▶



Buddleia attracts fascinating butterflies!

fatal as they can cause severe kidney failure. Even if a cat just brushes against the pollen and grooms it off their coat, this can lead to poisoning. Another plant to avoid is monkshood (*Aconitum napellus*), also known as wolfsbane, where all parts of the plant alive or dead are fatal if ingested, and yet it is widely available and often planted in gardens. Many types of bulbs can be dangerous to cats including daffodils, tulips and crocuses. For a list of poisonous plants, check out our website www.cats.org.uk/dangerous-plants. Additionally, avoid plants which may cause injury to your cat such as the century plant (*Agave americana*), which has needle-tipped leaves.

Other common garden hazards include garden chemicals, such as painting wood preservative on the fences and the use of pesticides such as slug pellets. Why not give nature a helping hand as well as protecting your cat by encouraging hedgehogs into your garden as a natural pest control for slugs and snails. For more information on wildlife gardening, check out the RSPB's campaign 'Give nature a home'. ●

A lookout point

Trellises, stone walls, shelving and trees can be used to create the perfect vantage point for your cat to observe their kingdom. David has an excellent idea to combine these, saying: "Having a multi-stemmed birch (*Betula*) and, within the planting, you could construct a series of interlinked platforms and posts to create a climbing frame within the tree and its branches. I think that this would be a popular place for cats."

A lawn of many uses

Lawn areas can provide space for your cat to run about and burn off excess energy. Why not have an al fresco interactive play session with your cat outside using a fishing rod toy? Cats have set patrol routes through the garden so you may see tracks in the grass left by your cat. They generally 'time share' with other cats if they have overlapping territories in order to carefully avoid one another, so it is important for your cat to be able to patrol at the same time each day where possible. Unfortunately this is where vet visits, which are vital for your cat's health and welfare, can sometimes upset the balance, particularly after a long stay of hospitalisation. Cats will commonly spray the periphery

of their territory to scent mark as a signal to both themselves and other cats. Where turf wars may be happening, you may notice the rather unpleasant use of strategically placed faecal marking, known as 'middening', which tends to happen in the middle of a lawn. If this is left by another cat, you'll need to get rid of the faeces and hose the lawn. If left by your own cat, then ideally it is best to leave this signal in situ where possible. Contact your vet and a qualified behaviourist, such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council, for more advice.

Garden hazards

The main plants to avoid are lilies which are toxic to cats and often

