

# Behaviour matters

## Cat-friendly garden design – part one

**A**re you a seasoned gardener looking to create a more cat-friendly space or perhaps you have a new build house with a blank canvas of a turfed lawn and are wondering where to start? Even a modest apartment patio can have a few small tweaks, such as a large seed tray planted with grass, to help meet your cat's needs. The best news is that what appeals to cats, also provides much needed habitat for wildlife and it is possible to safely combine the two. In terms of a garden style, country cottage or wildlife gardening are preferred by cats due to the naturalistic elements and a more complex environment, which stimulates the senses. They are not ones for minimalism! Before you get carried away with planting schemes or rush down to the local garden centre, it is best to carefully plan out your garden to ensure it meets both your needs and that of your cat! So what are the design elements to consider when gardening with your moggy in mind?

MAIN PHOTO: LEFT: DAVID MANNERS



*Left: Kaeto getting comfy*



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## The all-weather garden

Most cats enjoy all that the great outdoors has to offer, and while many cats tend to stay indoors increasingly as the weather worsens, some cats will persist with their outdoor expeditions throughout the winter. While a litter tray should always be provided, particularly during inclement weather, it can be helpful to know how to encourage year-round garden use. It is not only good for your moggy's mental health but can help to reduce some of the winter-induced tensions in households with two or more cats, when cats tend to spend more time in 'forced' close proximity.

Cats need an outdoor shelter that they can access easily and ideally one which is not shared with the neighbourhood feline foes. There are commercial cat shelters available or you could make a homemade one using a box lined with a soft blanket and covering it with a plastic roof to protect it. For the deluxe kitty retreat, you could add a microchip cat flap to a garden shed to allow access to only your cat and place shelving by a window to give them a secure room with a view. You could even plant up a green roof on top which is not only aesthetically pleasing, but also good for increasing your green space, encouraging wildlife and a good measure to help decrease surface water or flooding issues. Care at the planning stage means that the roof will cope with the additional weight of a green roof.

Areas of shade are important to provide for cats, especially for white cats which are more prone to sunburn. Black cats are also likely to appreciate the shade as their coats absorb the





heat. This could be in the form of shrub cover, which provides much-desired privacy and opportunities to hide or you may find your cat stretched out underneath garden furniture in order to keep cool. Outside potting benches with roofs may well be adopted by your cat to avoid the heat. Like their ancestors, cats like to naturally rotate their sleeping place and will do this in the garden too. Of course cats are partial to sunny spots for lounging around in the sun. My cat, Kaeto, is particularly fond of the novelty and comfort of a cushioned kneeling pad. So much so, that I need to always provide him with one when gardening, otherwise I find that he's stolen mine as soon as I get up!

## *Cats have an inbuilt need to be able to climb*

### **The sky's the limit**

Just like in the home, cats have an inbuilt need to be able to climb to elevated perches to survey their territory. It provides them with a sense of security and is a natural coping mechanism if they feel stressed or threatened. Outside cat shelves can be placed onto walls and fences, and crucially the best shelving locations are ones close to or on the house itself which face out onto the garden. Corner shelves with a solid wall behind the cat so that nothing can sneak up from behind will help your cat feel safe. This is particularly important where ▶

► conflict with neighbourhood cats may be happening. Existing structures in the garden such as children's wooden playhouses and climbing frames naturally provide a convenient lookout point. You could even design a series of vertical wooden posts, such as railway sleepers, or sculptures to add structure and interest to your garden but with your cat in mind so that they are the perfect height and perch size for your cat. Consideration needs to be given for older cats or blind cats so that they can still access these perches.

PHOTO: KAY TWINE

#### Al fresco facilities

Cats naturally gravitate towards ponds, often shunning their own water bowls in preference for a natural water source which is not tainted by chemicals. A wildlife pond with gently sloping sides and a pebble beach area provides a safe route for both wildlife and cats to escape. A safety metal grid/mesh just below the surface can be added for extra safety. Water butts tend to be more dangerous to cats than ponds due to their deep water and high sides so always make sure these

have a secure lid fitted to them. Water features, such as pondless fountains whereby the water reservoir is hidden beneath the ground like a millstone with gently bubbling water, are another favourite with cats and provide a focal point in the garden as well as the relaxing sound of flowing water. Ensure it is cat-safe with shallow water and easily accessible for your cat to drink from. Do not add any chemicals to it, especially antifreeze which is toxic to cats.

Many owners wish to keep the peace with their neighbours particularly if their cat has been toileting in someone else's garden. The trick is to provide inviting toileting facilities in the cat owner's garden. We all know how cats cannot resist a child's sand pit. Creating an outdoor cat toilet couldn't be easier, especially given that many keen gardeners do this accidentally! Cats like to toilet in an area of bare ground that has recently been dug over and it is even more appealing if some compost and/or child-safe play sand has been dug into it. This needs to be regularly maintained to avoid it becoming overgrown with weeds. Strategically placing some potted plants or maintaining shrubs nearby will provide your cat with privacy. Nervous cats will feel safer with a dug over border which is close to the house.

While scratch posts in the house are a great way to protect your sofa, you can also provide scratching opportunities in the garden in the form of tree stumps or thick trees with rough bark. Log piles are great as both a wildlife refuge and horizontal scratching surface for cats.

A few simple design tips mean both you and your cat can enjoy the great outdoors. ●

#### Taking the waters

