

Create a Cat-Garden

You love spending time in your backyard. But you may feel a twinge of guilt when you hear your indoor cats' plaintive meowing at the window while you're enjoying the fresh air and sunshine.

You may yearn to set them free. But you know that setting them loose comes with hazards — to your cats and to wildlife.

Instead, create an enclosed made-just-for-felines garden for your cats to safely enjoy the great outdoors along with you.

Elements of a successful cat garden are simple: cat-mint plants, cat-friendly tall grasses, a comfortable bench or rock to nap on, places to hide and even an outdoor litterbox.

But before you run out and buy flats of catnip plants, billowing grasses and soft ground cover, you must first make sure that your cat garden is escape-proof and predator-proof.

Enclose the Garden

There are many ways you can create an enclosed area for your cat's safety. Susan Gottlieb, a retired nurse, gives her four cats the run of her property

BY MARCIA PASSOS DUFFY

Make a beautiful outdoor space for you and your feline friends.



ROSEMARY NANCE

Friendly



using a series of cat runs on the acre of land surrounding her Beverly Hills, Calif., home. The runs end up at a completely enclosed courtyard and a second full enclosure on the roof of her house.

"While Beverly Hills is not 'wild,' we do have great horned owls, coyotes and bobcats here," says Gottlieb, who started her cat garden in 1990. "We needed to protect the cats from the wildlife and vice versa."

Like Gottlieb, you can build a completely enclosed pen for the cat garden, but you can also buy pre-made cat fences and enclose sections of the yard or an entire yard. These cat fences, made of the same material as deer fencing (polypropylene), are equipped with curved or hinged top overhangs that discourage cats from climbing over the fence and keep predators from coming in.

This kind of fence has recently been used to enclose the 50-plus felines at the Hemingway Home and Museum in Key West, Fla.

"The entire landscape is dedicated to the cats, most of which are direct descendents of the original [Ernest] Hemingway polydactyl cats," says Matt Hough, vice president of Lancaster, Penn.-based Purrfect Fence, which installed the fencing that surrounds the 1-acre historic property.



Catnip is a perennial favorite, and lamb's ear (foreground) is a soft, fuzzy plant that cats love to lay in.



What feline can resist a nap in the catnip?

Easy-to-Grow Catmint Varieties

No cat garden should be without catmint for your cats to roll around in, eat, pounce on and generally go crazy with.

Cats are attracted to many varieties of catmint because all have the chemical nepetalactone, which whips some cats into a frenzy, but catnip (*Nepeta cataria*) often produces a more intense reaction. Catnip is taller than other varieties, with smaller white or lilac-colored flowers; other catmints can grow in mounds and produce more intense flowers in blue and lavender.

Catmints are perennial, provide a long blooming season and feature pretty flowers and attractive leaves. Most are hardy in zones 4 to 9.

While you can plant almost any variety of mint in your cat garden, a study at the Chicago Botanic Garden picked four varieties that are the best for vigor, flowering and health:

- **Joanna Reed** has beautiful lavender-blue flowers and forms a tidy mound about 24 inches high and 48 inches wide.
- **Six Hills Giant** variety is a large impressive plant (36 inches high by 30 inches wide) with violet-blue flowers.
- **Select Blue** variety has dark lavender flowers and is more compact than the other varieties, growing to 14 inches high.
- **Walkers Low** has an intense color (dark purple) and will rebloom without deadheading.

Cats usually find lawns too exposed, but they're great for games of chase.



To create a cat garden, however, you don't need to enclose your entire yard. Hough says that many people opt to enclose a patio area for their cats or attach the fence to another part of the house and create an outdoor cat room there.

Plants to Include

Once you have an area safely enclosed, there are limitless options for creating a beautiful garden that both you and your cats will enjoy.

Monica Milla of Ann Arbor, Mich., a master gardener and garden coach, created a 10-foot by 20-foot cat garden for a nonprofit cat rescue operation in nearby Lodi Township, Mich. To enclose the area, she used a 6-foot-high black chain-link fence using a mesh attachment from Cat Fence-In, a fence company based in Sparks, Nev.

Milla wanted to create a landscape that encouraged cats to roll in, munch on, hide in and sleep on the plantings. Milla says that the cats loved the catmints, but also couldn't stay away from the supple plants.



Left: Cats appreciate the opportunity to nap in the sunshine in the safety of a fenced garden. Right: In a protected garden, your indoor cat will have a chance to climb a real tree.

"They loved to sit on soft plants," she says. She planted alyssum, cat thyme, creeping thyme, lamb's ear and heather.

For munching, Milla grew baby's breath and blue fescue grass. For fast germination and easy growing, she suggests trying organic wheat, oat and rye grasses. Other plants that will work (and are safe) in cat gardens include rose, lavender, coriander, buddleia, lovage, rosemary, violet, pansy and begonia.

Avoid Poisonous Plants

Most cats are finicky eaters, but many will nibble on all kinds of plants. Make sure what you plant in your cat garden is not poisonous, says Jill A. Richardson, DVM, a veterinarian based in Andover, N.J., who specializes in pet safety and toxicology.

Some of the most dangerous plants include lilies (which can cause kidney failure in cats); sago palms (which can cause liver failure); and azalea, rhododendron, lily of the valley, and foxglove (which are cardiotoxic to cats).

Richardson also recommends steering clear of chemical pesticides. The most dangerous to cats, she says, include any systemic insecticides, rat and mouse bait, snail and slug bait (metaldehyde), mole and gopher bait, and fly bait (methomyl).

Ideally, the garden should be accessed from the indoors to give the cats relief from the elements and free access to water, food and their litterbox, says Nan J. Peterson, cat programs manager for the Humane Society of the United States, based in Washington, D.C.

"You should also make sure your kitty is protected against fleas, ticks and heartworms," she says. "They may need different vaccinations than a strictly indoor cat." She also recommends that cats who have access to a cat garden wear safety collars with visible identification.

Elements of Success

Lastly, don't forget the niceties of a cat garden that will make your cat — and you — want to hang out in it. Cats love warm spots, places to hide, places to perch and even some cheap entertainment.



1. Stones for Lounging. Flat stones and stone walkways provide double duty: They warm up in the sun when it's cool and are cooler than the surrounding air when placed in the shade. Shady stone patios with moss will provide cool, soft areas to nap on hot summer days. Milla likes to add stepping stones, sidewalks or brick paths to divide the garden into areas. "It looks nice and helps humans access the plants, and the cats like to lounge on them," she says.

2. Perching Spots. Lance Walheim, an Exeter, Calif.-based horticulturalist and co-author of the book "Landscaping for Dummies" (For Dummies, 1999) and "Gardening for Dummies" (For Dummies, 2003), says cats love perches to get a better view of the surrounding landscape.

"This can be as simple as a split-rail fence," he says. Berches, large rocks, small trees and even berms (small hills) can be created in a flat landscape for cats to climb

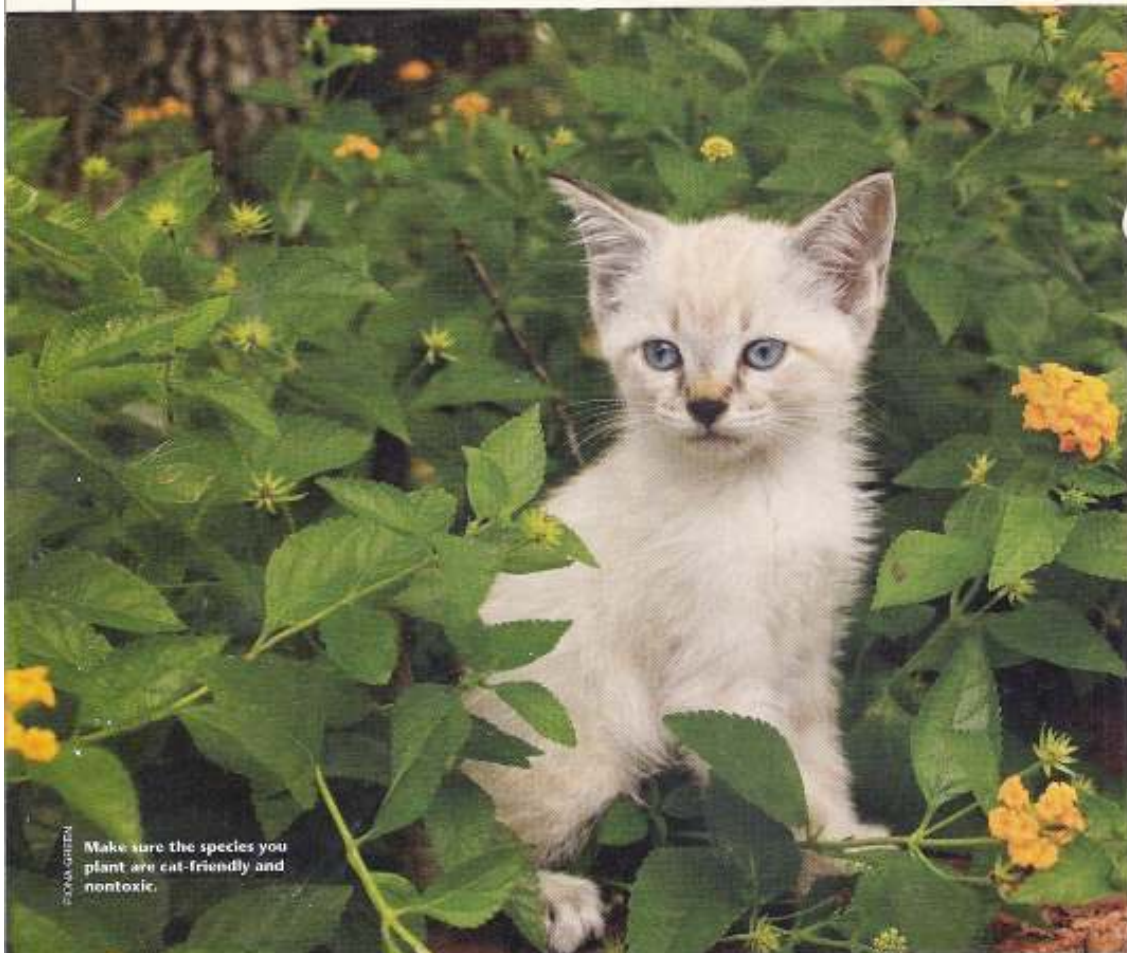
Polypropylene cat fences with overhanging tops effectively keep cats in and predators out.

and keep an eye on things in the garden.

3. Hiding Spots. "Cats don't like lawn — it's too exposed," says Ann Amato-Buttitta, an avid gardener in Portland, Ore., who, along with her husband, Pietro, has created a cat garden for their three cats. She includes benches and shrubs where her cats can hide and sleep. Some homeowners even use pre-made small doghouses for cats to hole up in.

4. Cheap Thrills. Add flowers that arch and bounce in the wind (such as baby's breath) for the cat to play with. You can even try hanging toys from a branch of a tree. Amato-Buttitta also keeps a small old bird cage full of live catnip plants.

"The cage prevents them from eating it all, and they love to sit beside it," she says.



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Make sure the species you plant are cat-friendly and nontoxic.

5. A Place to "Go." For an outdoor "naturalized" litterbox, dig a hole the same size as the plastic litterbox you will use. Level the bottom of the hole, then put the plastic litterbox in the hole and fill it with fine sand. To naturalize, surround the litterbox with a stone border. As with an indoor litterbox, you will have to periodically clean it.

6. Water. Make sure your cat has access to fresh water; a fountain can provide this, but avoid standing water (such as ponds), which can collect mosquito eggs.

If you provide water bowls, change the water daily.

Once you have a safe, enclosed garden with beautiful plants, you can finally enjoy the great outdoors — with your cat and without the guilt. 🐾

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