



HOW DOES YOUR CAT GRASS GROW?

Satisfy your kitty's green palate with feline-friendly indoor gardens

by LIZ BERGSTROM

In the 13 years since she was adopted from an animal shelter, Elly has amassed a long list of victims: bouquets of roses. A potted palm tree. A philodendron that her owners got as newlyweds.

The gray tabby's most impressive kill to date: 20 heirloom tomato plants left to sprout on the windowsill.

"I had gone through the excruciating process of saving the seeds—and it's this whole rigmarole to save heirloom tomatoes—and then got them started as seedlings and thinned them," says owner MaryLea Harris of Northern Virginia. But less than five minutes after she removed the protective cover, Elly mowed the tops off the prized sproutings.

"My plants were instantly dead. I was so perturbed," says Harris.

In time, the avid gardener forged a compromise with her resident plant assassin. She rehomed most of her houseplants via Freecycle and placed the remaining ones on mantles and other spots outside the tabby's reach. And she began

growing indoor kitty gardens—ceramic pots with cat grass—where Elly now grazes to her heart's content.

CAT OR COW?

Not every kitty has a green tongue, but those who do seem to fall into two camps, says Monique Maniet, a holistic veterinarian in Bethesda, Md.: Some are delicate nibblers while others devour stalks and leaves with gusto.

Many owners assume their cats eat plants for the chlorophyll and other nutrients, but it's not clear that pets ingest enough plant material to gain any significant health benefits, Maniet says. The lawn-mower types may have an oral fixation, especially if they also chew on wool, plastic, or other inedibles, she adds.

Another common assumption is that cats eat grass to medicate an upset stomach or to induce vomiting. But in his studies of pets'

herbivorous habits, veterinarian Benjamin Hart of the University of California–Davis has found no evidence of this. He theorizes that eating plants is an innate behavior that played a role in feline evolution. Researchers have found that leaf eating reduces intestinal parasites in wild chimpanzees; the same may be true for tigers, lions, and other wild felids, Hart says. Through the generations, those animals with a taste for greens would have been healthier and more likely to survive and pass on this tendency to their offspring.



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Fast-forward to our modern-day housecats, who still retain many wild behaviors. Eating plants may be one of them. Unfortunately, most cats don't discriminate between feline-friendly greens like catnip and cat grass—typically a mix of oat, rye, barley, and wheat grasses—and the many indoor plants that are toxic to them. Sacramento, Calif., veterinarian Irene Fujishima cautions pet owners to keep houseplants out of pets' reach. "Every year, I have patients die from kidney failure secondary to lily intoxication," she writes in an email.

A TASTE OF THE WILD

The fact that his pets enjoy nibbling greens is reason enough for Steve Delanty to keep his kitty gardens sprouting. Max, a former feral cat, especially "appreciates a touch of the outdoors in his life," writes the Healdsburg, Calif., resident in an email.

Delanty sows oat grass seeds in con-

tainers large enough for his cats to lounge in, keeping the seedlings outside until they're hardy enough to survive his pets' attentions. Every few weeks, Max, Bella, and Tilly have a newly established "cat lawn" to snack on.

For Harris, cat gardens provide some compensation for the houseplants she's given up. On the blog where she describes creative kids' projects, the former art teacher has written about Elly's miniature nurseries, detailing how her two young daughters enjoy tending to and decorating them. And every spring, Harris grows cat grass in aluminum pie plates to line her children's Easter baskets—and provide a holiday treat for Elly.

Best of all, there's the pleasure of watching her beloved cat enjoy safe greens that the family has carefully planted and nurtured. "I can't have any other plants around her," Harris says. "... The cat grass keeps her happy."



GARDEN OF EATIN'

Tips to keep your kitty garden thriving

- ▶ For best results, grow cat grasses from seeds, available at a pet supply store or online. Choose a heavy, shallow container that your cats are unlikely to knock over and fill it about three quarters full with loose potting soil, using a spray bottle to dampen the soil as you add it. Place the container on a saucer or tray.
- ▶ Sprinkle seeds evenly over the surface. Cover lightly with about a quarter inch of soil.
- ▶ Cover the container very loosely with plastic wrap. Keep at room temperature and away from direct sunlight (and out of reach of curious pets). Make sure the soil doesn't dry out.
- ▶ Sprouts should appear in a few days. Remove the covering and move the pot to a sunny spot.
- ▶ Water the sprouts when the soil begins to feel dry to the touch. Don't let excess water sit in the container.
- ▶ Offer your cats the grass when it's 3 to 4 inches tall.
- ▶ When the grass wilts after a few weeks, pull out the shoots and plant more seeds. For a steady supply, plant several pots a week or two apart. Monitor your cats for signs of overconsumption, such as vomiting or diarrhea, and limit access to the plants if necessary.

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