

Powder Room Perfect

Not all litterboxes are alike. Learn the features of each, then choose the one that's best for your pet.

Peggy Scott

How does she know how to do that, you wonder, amazed as your new kitten clambers in her litterbox to do her duty. It's a great mystery to most cat owners, but animal behaviorists clearly understand our cats' natural affinity for using the litterbox.

"It's an inbred characteristic," explains John Prange, DVM, a veterinary consultant for LitterMaid, a self-cleaning litterbox manufacturer. "Cats were originally desert animals, and they discovered they liked to cover their waste with sand. It's easy to dig into."

Many innovations throughout the years have improved the conditions in which our cats answer nature's call. But if you think setting up the perfect cat bathroom means simply tossing any old litter into an old box and walking away, you've barely scratched the surface.

In the past, owning an indoor cat was challenging as far as litter box issues were concerned. We used sand or wood ashes as box filler and put up with the smell because we loved our cats and wanted to keep them safe. That changed in the late 1940s when clay salesman Edward Lowe discovered his product worked rather nicely in a cat's litterbox. More and more of us began bringing our cats indoors. In 1984, Thomas Nelson came up with a clumping version of clay-based litter. Touting his product as a better way to handle cat box duties, Nelson called his litter Better Way.

Since then, the market has become literally littered with litters and there's a bumper crop of box choices as well, priced from a few dollars to upward of \$200. In addition, numerous accessories, such as box liners, specially-designed scoopers and odor control products are available.

The reason for this plethora of products is clear: Cats are the No. 1 pet in America, and cat owners will go out of their way to ensure their cats' happiness and health. Just look at the numbers on litterboxes alone. According to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association's (APPMA) 1999-2000 National Pet Owners Survey, eight out of 10 cat owners own a litter box. Seventy-two percent of total cat owners own one litterbox, 44 percent of multiple-cat owners own two or more boxes, and 88 percent of single-cat owners own one box.

And not only do we have more cats, but today's indoor cats are living longer. An average outdoor cat's life expectancy is two to five years, whereas an indoor cat's is 17 or more years, according to The Humane Society of the United States and the American Humane Association.

To accommodate these indoor cats and their needs, there is a wide selection of litter products available.

Higher tech choices include the Lift N' Sift litterbox system and the Petmate Litter Pan and Hood sets. The three-tray system works like this: a sifting tray sits inside a solid tray. You pour the litter into the top tray and let kitty take it from there. To clean, just lift the sifting tray and sift out the clumps. Place the sifting tray into the empty tray and pour the litter from the full tray into the empty one. Put the now-empty one on the bottom. The Petmate Litter Pan and Hood sets mean "privacy for your cat and less spills and odor for you." The hood holds your liner in place, and replaceable odor-controlling filters help keep things fresh. These setups each cost about \$20.

Van Ness has a whole line of boxes, including Enclosed Cat Pans. These pans are designed to prevent spills, provide privacy and freshen trapped air with zeolite filters; zeolite is an odor trapping mineral. Van Ness also offers the Sifting Cat Pan - which eliminates scooping, cat owners simply lift the screen and sift the lumps out - and the Large-Framed Cat Pan. The frame snaps onto the bottom, holding a liner in place. The sifting pan is about \$20, and the framed pan is about \$10.

Booda carries the basic Booda Box litterbox, the hooded Booda Loo litterbox, which features a transparent odor control door, and the top-of-the-line Booda Zero-Max Push Button Litter System, which has a retractable lid with an extra-wide opening for easier cleaning. This Booda product features more headroom for kitty and the Zero-Max Odor Prevention charcoal filter system. Booda's boxes range in price from approximately \$22 to \$40.

Ease of cleaning is also the focus of LitterMaid's Advanced Deluxe Automatic Self-Cleaning Litter Box, which appears to be something right out of the Jetsons. You fill the box with premium-quality clumping litter and either plug it into a

convenient wall socket or let it run on D-cell batteries.

LitterMaid has launched its own line of fragrance-free clumping litter in order to "control the variations" found in litter, according to Kristen Verrati, marketing manager for LitterMaid.

"The moisture content [in litter] varies, as do the antibacterial additives, and whether fragrance is added," Verrati explains.

With the LitterMaid system, an electronic eye senses when kitty has used and departed the box. Ten minutes later, an automatic sifting rake moves through the litter, picking up any waste and depositing it into a sealed, airtight container. The sifting comb then returns to its original position, ready for your kitty's next visit.

When the reusable/disposable waste container is full, it can be thrown away or washed out for reuse. Convenience doesn't come cheap, however; the basic Litter- Maid model runs about \$160, while the "Mega" Advanced Deluxe setup costs \$200. Available accessories include a paw-cleaning mat (\$15), replacement receptacles (\$20) and a privacy tent (\$20).

Perhaps even more futuristic is the R2D2-esqe Litter-Robot. This large-capacity, automatic self-cleaning device, which is a large globe sitting on a base, works with all clumping litters and promises no more mess, no more hassles and "happy cats," says Brad Baxter, president of Automated Pet Care Products, makers of the Litter-Robot.

Your cat enters the opening in the globe by stepping onto a small step. The globe's liner diverts spray back into the litter and ensures that litter doesn't get stuck to the inside of the globe during the waste removal cycle. When the cat exits, a sensor is tripped and after 15 minutes, the globe rotates, sending waste clumps through a port into a drawer in the base. Owners maintain the unit by removing the waste bag. This futuristic feline facility can hold up to one week's waste production by two cats, according to Baxter. The unit costs about \$350.

Tidy Cats' new disposable cat box-and-litter-in-one also falls into the easy-to-clean category. Once the box has served its purpose, you simply fold it shut and discard it. Each box contains a seven-day supply (for one cat) of Tidy Cats' Long-Lasting Odor Control Litter.

"These boxes are great for traveling, and very handy," says Char Bebiak, animal trainer and behaviorist for Tidy Cats, a division of Ralston Purina. "They even fold down." Suggested retail price is \$2.99.

The Catio Indoor/Outdoor Kitty Litter Box is part litterbox and part sunroom. One side holds the litterbox and the other can be used as Kitty's personal getaway. Cats enter and exit through a flap door. The enclosure mounts in a window, much like an air-conditioning unit. It reportedly virtually eliminates odors - the box is outside and the fresh air provides circulation - and offers cats "the best place for litter and leisure," according to the manufacturer. The unit costs \$259.

The Purr-fect Privy might be more to your cat's liking - and more to yours. Designed by a cat breeder, this litter containment system looks like furniture with its light oak or white laminate exterior. Its patented grid system is designed to solve scatter and tracking problems. kitty enters, walks across a grid on the second level, then down to the box on the first level. As the cat climbs back out, the grid cleans the litter off its paws and the particles fall back into the pan. The system also prevents nosy household canines from getting into the litterbox. Prices range from \$139.95 to 199.95, depending on the model. Call (800) 434-1919, or visit www.pfprivy.com

A Litter of Litters

If you think there is a wide variety of litterboxes, wait until you go shopping for litter. We've come a long way since the days of Lowe and Nelson. Last year, litter generated more than \$950 million in sales and the industry produced 400 billion pounds of the stuff. Litters fall into four basic categories: traditional clay, clumping, natural/alternative and silica sand.

Clay litter is known for its low cost, easy availability and simple disposal (just toss it out with the trash). Unless it contains deodorizers, odor control may not be as efficient as with other types of litter, and it can be dusty and trackable. The dust may bother asthmatic cats.

"Cats like dirt, and clay is basically dirt," says Kimberlie Teel, whose San Clemente, Calif., based K.A.T. Co. manufactures Kat-Lite, a clay/pumice litter. "Clay has an earthy smell they like; it's not some foreign matter.

Clumping litters make for easier cleanup because the soiled litter forms clumps that are easily scooped out. Some varieties are even flushable. Cats tend to like the texture of this type of litter. On the downside, ingested litter can cause tummy irritation or obstructions, and it is trackable. "Clumping litter is so much easier for cleanup, whether you have a manual system or not. And its clumping action surrounds the waste, controlling odor," says Kristen Verrati.

Natural/Alternative litters are produced from wood, newspaper and other natural fibers. Wood-based products have natural odor control; and paper products tend to track less. Some naturals do come in clumping formulas, and many are flushable or biodegradable. The litter's western red cedar and sodium bentonite, which is added to clay, makes for a litter that's "naturally odor-controlling," says Gary Burrell, marketing director for Cedar Fresh Scoop. "Consumers are continually looking for something to control odor better," he says.

Silica litters, one of the latest litters, uses "micropore technology" to evaporate moisture and trap odor - to the extent that consumers can reportedly go one month without changing litter (per cat).

"Silica litters are about odor control," says Jennifer Condren, marketing manager for Tidy Cat. "Silica gel products may be more expensive, but they last longer."

Other advances in technology include Purina Pet Product's Hemalert feline urinary blood detection system, which allows cat owners (and their veterinarians) to monitor a cat's urinary tract health at home.

Hemalert, available only from veterinarians, is mixed with litter and changes color if there is evidence of hematuria (blood in the urine). Susan McDonough, DVM, coordinator of the Hemalert study points out that a veterinarian's expertise is still required.

"This product has its place," Dr. McDonough says. "Blood in the urine is always a sign something is wrong. In such cases, take your cat to the vet."

Another option, Pet Ecology Brands Inc.'s Scientific Cat Litter Urinary Tract Health Indicator, alerts cat owners to possible feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) before symptoms appear. The litter tests the pH in your cat's urine for abnormal alkalinity, which causes crystals called struvite, to form in a cat's bladder.

With all of these choices to be made for you and your cat, remember to keep your cat's best interests in mind when you choose a litter and a box. These items are more important than you may realize.