

## Green Home Guide for Cat Parents

### Tips to setting up an eco-friendly household for you and your feline friend

By Lindsey Getz

While plenty of eco-savvy Americans have taken steps to reduce their carbon footprints by living greener lifestyles, most forget to worry about their cat's "carbon pawprint." But the products you buy your cats and even the food they consume can be detrimental to the environment. Consider setting up an eco-friendly household that will not only help protect the environment, but can make your house safer for your cats, too.

#### The Food Bowl

Because organic food contains no pesticides, hormones, synthetic fertilizers or antibiotics, it is good for the environment and may even be healthier for your cat. But how you make the switch can be crucial to your pet's health.

"When I was in private practice, the most common thing I saw was gastrointestinal upset," says Edward Moser, a board-certified veterinary nutritionist and adjunct assistant professor of nutrition at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. "And oftentimes, it was because the cat was having trouble adjusting to a new food."

Moser, who also sits on the United States Department of Agriculture panel for the National Organic Program's Pet Food Task Force, says that switching the food gradually is the most important tip. Slowly mix the new food into your cat's existing food over a five- to seven-day period, adding a little more each day until your cat is fully adjusted. If your cat goes on a hunger strike or isn't eating as much as normal, it's important not to force the change or you could put its health at risk. You might want to try a completely different brand or make the switch even more slowly next time. It could take a full month of gradually adding a tiny bit of new food until your cat starts to like it.

If you're considering the idea of cooking your cat's food, tread cautiously. While home-cooked diets can be wonderful, you have to work closely with a veterinarian. "You can't just go on the Internet and come up with a diet," warns Michael Selmer, DVM, of the Advanced Animal Care Center in Huntington Station, N.Y. "Every cat can have different dietary needs." Selmer's practice offers nutritional blood tests that allow him to help cat owners design a diet for their cat's specific needs. It's crucial that you create a diet that's balanced with the proper minerals and vitamins.

#### Garage or Under the Sink

Many cleaning products are full of chemicals that can be toxic to your cat. Look for natural biodegradable cleaners that say "safe for pets," on the bottle. Or, consider making your own cleaning supplies. Baking soda mixed with warm water works as a safe general-purpose cleaner. Vinegar mixed with water can work well on glass and can do wonders on cat urine stains on the carpet.

Try a safer toilet bowl cleaner, too. Traditional cleaners can cause blindness if accidentally splashed in your pet's eyes. But before you switch to a natural alternative, make sure residue from a long-lasting synthetic cleaning product is washed away from the inside of the toilet tank. Use ½ cup of baking soda to scrub the inside of the toilet bowl. Better yet, pour a cup of borax into the bowl and leave it overnight. In the morning, the bowl should be clean without scrubbing.

#### Play Area

There are plenty of toys on the market today that were made without harming the environment. When selecting eco-friendly toys, the same rules apply as any other toy you'd give your cat — keep safe play your top priority. Making your own toys from items such as socks or old clothing can be a great way to recycle, but keep a few things in mind.

"If you're using fabric, make sure it will not fray or shred easily," says Nancy Soares, VMD, founder and owner of Macungie Animal Hospital in Macungie, Pa. "And be especially careful of strings that could get wrapped around your cat, or anything that is loose that they could choke on."

#### The Litterbox

According to the American Bureau of Waste Management, approximately 8 billion pounds of cat litter wind up in landfills each year. Consider a litter made from recycled material, suggests Ann Hohenhaus, director of medicine at the Animal Medical Center in New York City. Such materials include wood, pine or bark recycled from lumber companies and recycled newspaper. Natural flushable litters include corn, wheat and soy. (Check your local ordinances, because not all cities allow flushing litter waste into sewage systems.)

If you switch litters, keep in mind that cats tend to be highly selective about the type they use. “From a feline’s perspective, the litterbox is her domain,” Soares says. “Abrupt changes can lead to unwanted behaviors like inappropriate urination.” Make the transition smoother by doing it as gradually as possible. Soares says it might take as long as three months.

Some cats may never adjust. “There will be some stubborn cats out there who will just refuse to make the switch, no matter how gradual,” Soares says. “If that’s the case, let him or her live with what they’re used to and choose another aspect of their life to work on being more eco-friendly. You may have to accept that you can’t change everything.”

Hohenhaus agrees, and says the switch isn’t always worth it. “Some cats will retaliate if they’re angry,” she says. “If you wind up with an angry cat that pees on your bed, and the mattress has to wind up in the landfill — that’s not green either.”

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