

Scratching the Surface

Understanding this basic behavior can salvage your furniture and save your relationship with your cat.

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Posted: Tue Aug 3 00:00:00 PDT 2004

"I got my cat a nice scratching post at the grocery store and he never uses it," lament some frustrated cat owners. Many think that their cats are scratching the furniture for a vindictive reason, and nothing could be further from the truth. Check the post to see if it meets the cat's needs in terms of type, stability and location. Because cat scratching is a natural, genetic behavior, if the post meets the cat's needs, it will be used.

Is the carpet or rope too tight for the cat to dig its claws into? Is the post too short for the cat to completely stretch its back? Is the post unstable when the cat tries to use it? From a cat's perspective, the wrong posts are not suitable scratching options, if the corner of the sofa is tall enough, stable and has loosely woven fabric for claws to hook into.

"The best way to tell what kind of scratching post your cat wants is to watch it," said Sharon Crowell-Davis, Ph.D., a professor and behavioral researcher at the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine. "Look at where and what the cat is scratching. Once you know what your cat prefers, you can design a cat-scratch post that meets your cat's needs."

Some cats prefer a vertical surface while others prefer a horizontal surface. Also look for a scratching surface that matches your cat's preference in terms of texture and coarseness.

"Instead of just selecting something you think is attractive-looking at the pet store, see if you can find something that matches what your cat is going for [at home]," Crowell-Davis said.

"A scratch post should be at least 3 feet high and absolutely rock solid," Dodman said.

You also may want to provide several different surfaces, or bring in a log from outside and fix it in a corner.

"In our house, we have a sacrificial chair," Dodman said. "The cats chose a chair to use and we said, 'good,' that is keeping them away from other furniture."

"For cats that scratch up carpets in a particular location, ... put down a throw rug right on top of where they scratch and periodically replace it," Crowell-Davis said.