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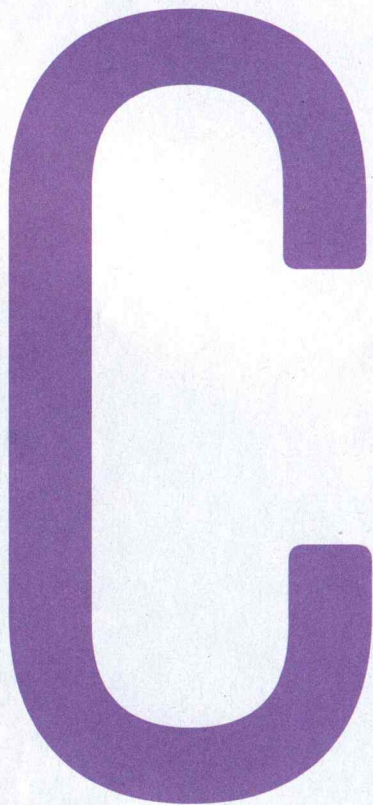
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AROMATIC ADVENTURES

DON'T FORGET YOUR CAT'S
SENSE OF SMELL WHEN PLANNING
ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES;
IT CAN PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN
STIMULATING HER MIND AND BOOSTING
HER WELL-BEING.

» By Jen Reeder





While Marek was delighted to see such activities for the big cats, she wasn't surprised. The author of the forthcoming book *Happy Cat, Happy Home*, and a volunteer for O'Malley Alley Cat Rescue in Texas, prioritizes providing scent enrichment for her own companion cat, Bebe. Years ago, she met a veterinarian who told her about the importance of bringing in something new for a cat to smell or explore *every day*.

"It's really easy because I'm always out in the yard," says Marek. "So I go, 'Here's a blade of grass,' or 'Oh, here's a pretty maple leaf, or here's a rock.'"

Bebe also enjoys smelling paper takeout bags from a local Italian restaurant and then playing with the bag, or with the plastic spoons that come with the food. Marek also offers her cat caps from milk jugs (fun to skitter across the floor), lids from plain yogurt, cottage cheese and vanilla ice cream containers, plus boxes from Amazon and eBay.

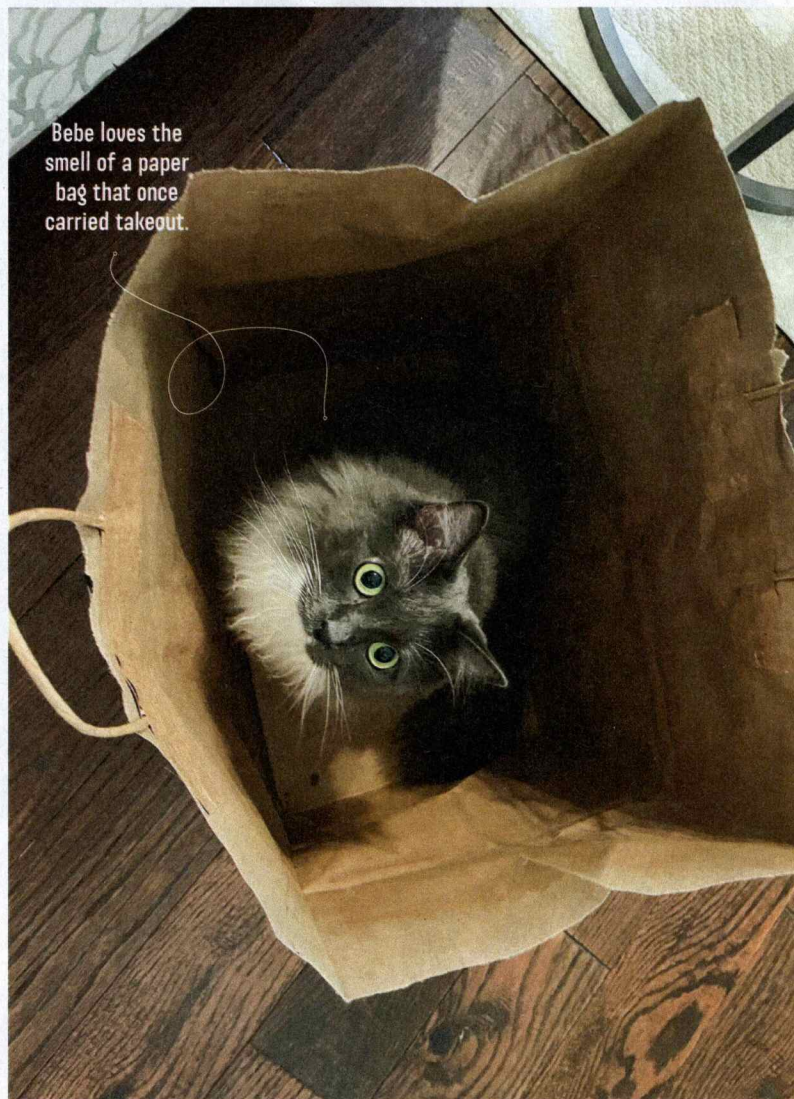
His favorite scent enrichment activity, though, is sitting in front of an open, screened window to smell the breeze and keep an eye on squirrels and birds in the backyard.

Marek says her cat is always doing something, so she's happy to have

at lover Ramona Marek recalls being "amazed" watching scent enrichment activities for tigers at Tiger Creek Animal Sanctuary in Tyler, Texas. For instance, members of the staff scooped up hay from the goat enclosures and stuffed it into a large paper bag—which the tigers enjoyed tearing open to playfully roll in the hay.

The team also filled a cardboard box with treats, cut out a few holes and hung it from a tree so that tigers could sniff and tug at the box before shredding it. But the most surprising scent enrichment activity involved an empty, sealed box hung from a tree that had been sprayed with Axe body spray.

"This tiger was just going crazy at it," she recalls. "He tore it down and carried it in his mouth, just like you see our cats carry their little toys back to the place where they want to play with them."



Bebe loves the smell of a paper bag that once carried takeout.

BOTANICAL BUZZ

ENRICHMENT GAMES BASED ON CATNIP—AND OTHER PSYCHOACTIVE PLANTS



Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*) is the poster plant for “enrichment by scent”—a quick, low-effort way to give indoor cats a novel sensory event when the world outside the window is off-limits. For most cats, the reaction to catnip’s active ingredient, nepetalactone, an aromatic terpene, begins when they inhale it, sending them into paroxysms of bliss and joy.

What does that look like? Some cats are drawn to the plant’s oils and react with what’s been described as “wanton abandonment”—rubbing against it, vocalizing, rolling around, chewing or drooling. When exposed, cats may sniff and lick, shake their heads, rub their chin and cheeks on the source, roll over drooling and kick it with their hind feet. The response is not sexual, and the effects usually last five to 15 minutes.

Not every cat responds. About a third have no reaction, according to a study

conducted at Canyon Ranch, and kittens typically don’t react to catnip until they begin to reach sexual maturity at about 6 months old. And while it’s tempting to compare catnip to human recreational drugs, catnip isn’t considered addictive or harmful.

For enrichment, you can use catnip as part of a structured, sequential scent game or puzzle your cat needs to solve. First, present a catnip-scented object and let your cat choose how to interact; then end the encounter by calmly trading the toy for a treat or wand play.

Next, build a simple scent trail. Pick a format (plants, sprays, loose leaves, flowers/buds, pellets, even dental chews). Then dab or sprinkle a tiny amount on two or three stations—one on a scratcher, one on a toy, one on a safe “sniff spot” (a towel, cardboard scratch pad or paper bag). Move the stations around the room or up to different heights

so your cat has to search, discover and choose a favorite. If you want energetic play, prioritize sniffing: When cats sniff catnip, it can trigger bliss; when they eat it, it tends to act more like a sedative.

Keep the enrichment purposeful: Rub catnip on a post to redirect furniture scratching, and refresh toys to spark movement and play.
—Michele C. Hollow

Other feel-good plants cats love

Because of genetics, some cats won’t respond to catnip, but they needn’t be left out of the fun. Other mind-bending botanicals include:

Silvertine, which works for about 80% of cats, more so than catnip. It can be used as a powder on toys or posts or as a chew stick.

Tatarian honeysuckle is effective for inducing bliss in 50% of cats, but only the wood is psychoactive. Get it from a reliable source, because berries and flowers are toxic.

Valerian root also works for 50% of kitties, but avoid human valerian products and buy from a cat-focused vendor.



Tigers at a Texas sanctuary tug at scented boxes.

him do an activity she approves of rather than making mischief.

“For indoor cats, it’s super important because they have limited access to their natural environment,” she says. “It’s up to us to bring something in for them so they aren’t missing out.”

ADD IT TO THE PLAN

Many experts believe that scent-based enrichment should be part of any comprehensive care routine, right along with activities such as playing with a wand toy, climbing and

scratching. “Olfactory enrichment is probably the most ignored type of enrichment,” says Mikel Maria Delgado, a certified applied animal behaviorist and owner of the cat consultation business Feline Minds. “It’s something we struggle to understand because we do not have the same kind of olfactory experience that our cats do.”

Never force things on your cat, however. Just make smelling opportunities available and kitty’s instinct will take over. Don’t thrust a pungent leaf in your cat’s face, just

IN CHARLESTON, A CAT ENRICHMENT GARDEN GROWS LEMONGRASS, ROSEMARY AND CATNIP.

place it on the floor a few feet away from her.

“You can put it on the ground and let them interact with it or not, and then take it away after a day and it’s fine,” Delgado advises.

KEEP CONTROL

She also suggests offering just a scent or two at once to avoid overwhelming your cat, and avoiding any outdoor items that you suspect a dog might have peed on, since this could disrupt the natural smells as well as instill fear. In general, she notes, it’s important to supervise scent enrichment activities, particularly in homes with multiple cats.

Her three cats—Ruby, Coriander and Professor Scribbles—will fight over the plant silvertine, for instance. They also surprised her when a friend gave her a piece of palo santo, a fragrant wood that caused them to “swarm” around her in excitement.

It’s important, she believes, to pay attention to each individual cat’s response to various scents to learn what they like—and to see if anything changes over time. For example, feline sense of smell

may decline with age, so it can be helpful to heat a senior's food to increase the aroma.

GARDEN OF OLFACTORY DELIGHTS

Cat shelters that have experimented with scent enrichment have found that it can have a meaningful psychological impact on cats. One shelter, the Charleston Animal Society, a South Carolina nonprofit that sheltered nearly 20,000 cats last year, has a garden full of dazzling scents that its feline residents find extremely calming. Its Maria Panella Cat Enrichment Garden grows cat-safe aromatic plants, including lemongrass, Roman chamomile,

lemon balm, catnip, rosemary, cat thyme and valerian.

Volunteers trim bits off the plants for its indoor-sheltered cats, according to Kay Hyman, senior director of community engagement at Charleston Animal Society.

"The benefit to the cats is mental stimulation to help reduce their boredom and anxiety," she says. "Many of our cats were strays found outside, and the exposure to the plants can lead to calmer, more confident cats; this helps them to be more adoptable."

The garden also improves the welfare of community cats living outdoors; in full bloom, the space



Well-chosen aromatic plants can be extremely calming for cats.



offers scents as well as hiding spots, perches and textures allowing normal feline behavior, she notes.

In 2022, cat behavior and wellness expert Jackson Galaxy, author of *Total Cat Mojo*, enjoyed attending the dedication ceremony of the cat enrichment garden. He would love to see more shelters create similar gardens to benefit cats while also raising awareness of the benefits of feline scent enrichment. He feels it helps cats connect with what he calls the "raw cat," or primal cat, making them feel confident and safe.

"Their nose is their primary tool," he says. "It keeps them alive. It highlights both opportunity and threat."

Galaxy is a fan of "marinating toys" by putting an old stuffed cat toy into a jar with catnip or silv erine for a day or two to basically make it a thrilling brand-new toy. He also suggests using snuffle mats so cats can sniff out treats, or hiding treats in toys around the home.

"They're actually utilizing their raw cat to locate prey, and to hunt it and eat it," he says. "All these different little ways that you can use scent are a key to cat wellness." #