

## Gardening with Wildlife....Indoors!

by Anne Robin

We brought home a new family member a few months ago. Max is a 13 pound, two-year-old Maine Coon Cat. We had forgotten what a joy it is to have a young critter in the house. This fur ball locomotive tears around, up and down any furniture he can find, tripping up area rugs and generally making a mess of things. And of course, we laugh 'til we have tears in our eyes!

Luckily, most of my indoor plants had been "dog-proofed" for many years. This meant large pots that could not be easily knocked over, smaller plants up on the piano, dressers, etc. And most of all, non-toxic plants. Cats, however, have a few more requirements for indoor plants than dogs do.

The largest pots would make lovely litter boxes, all that nice soil in just such a convenient location. To combat this activity, largish smooth pebbles act as a decorative mulch. Use at least three inch or larger size rocks. They fly much less easily than smaller marble-sized pebbles. Plants that have fun hanging things, like spider plants, need to be inaccessible to little paws. Hanging plants from ceiling hooks away from any furniture seems to be pretty effective. And when behavior management is required, many cat people recommend using a simple squirt gun to reinforce the "oh no, not that!" message. Max, being a very intelligent cat, only has to see the squirt gun to get the idea. It doesn't mean he doesn't keep trying to push the limits; he is a CAT after all!

But since cats like to nibble on green things, there are bound to be some plants that he chews. You can grow your cat some wheat or rye grass in a little pot and encourage him to nibble there instead of on your prized ficus. They sell kits, but all you need is a small pot, some potting soil without added fertilizers, and some rye grass seed. Plant, keep moist till it sprouts, and then put it in a nice sunny window to grow. Max didn't like it. But I hear most cats do. Maybe I'll try some alfalfa next....

There are long lists of toxic and non-toxic house plants. The lists of plants toxic to dogs and cats are similar. One of the most well-known bits of common wisdom is that poinsettias are poisonous. They are, but only slightly. Mostly they will irritate the mucous membranes in the mouth, and may cause some nausea and vomiting. A dog might ingest enough to be harmful, but cats are less enthusiastic and probably won't eat enough to be a problem.

Some popular houseplants that are toxic to cats are: dieffenbachia (dumb cane), ivies, ferns, pothos, caladium, calla, corn plant, croton, kalanchoe, lilies, mother-in laws tongue (snake plant), rubber plant, schefflera, and philodendron. Depending on the plant, only some parts may be poisonous, but lilies especially are toxic through and through. Many of these plants are indoor gardening delights, so protecting your cat doesn't mean you can't keep your favorite plants. Use the squirt gun to help your cat learn to avoid them, or you can spray the pots and possibly the plants with a substance like Bitter Apple, found in all pet stores, which tastes horrible. Or, hang your plants where they can't be reached.

If your cat does manage to eat a toxic plant, a veterinary visit will be essential. Take the plant with you, if possible. There is also an Animal Poison Control Center (1-888-426-4435) that provides 24/7 veterinary consultation for a \$50 (fifty dollar U.S.) fee.

Well worth it when it is midnight, snowing, and you can't get in touch with an emergency veterinarian quickly enough.

Indoor gardening is a pleasure, especially during these cold gray months when our veggie beds are covered in snow. Houseplants help clean the air of pollutants and brighten up our indoor environments. Gardeners who “have to play in the dirt” can re-pot, prune, water, move around, and generally get their plant addictions met by having indoor gardens of all sorts. The wildlife that live indoors with us—cats, dogs, kids, birds, etc.—can also enjoy the fresh air and beauty that we have in houseplants as long as we are careful in our choices and wise in our placements!

To get the full list of toxic and non-toxic plants for cats, both indoors and outdoor, go to the Cat Fanciers Website: <http://www.cfa.org> and search for articles on plants. The UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardeners, 209.533.5696, can also provide lists of toxic plants. The Master Gardener booth at the upcoming Tuolumne County Home and Garden show will feature Gardening with Wildlife presentations. Bring your questions!

*Anne Robin is a higher-elevation Master Gardener who loves both her outdoor and indoor “wildlife.”*