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Columnists



Denise Flaim
ANIMAL HOUSE

What's kitty been smoking?

May 29, 2006

Turn on, tune in, drop out.

For cats, at least, herbally induced recreational activity is not only popular, but perfectly legal.

As its name all but shouts, catnip - technically, *Nepeta cataria* and a handful of other sun-loving cultivars - has a special appeal to felines, thanks to the chemical nepetalactone, which acts as an olfactory stimulus. (You sniff it, dude.) Reactions to this nonaddictive member of the mint family include a period of sniffing and licking, followed by head shaking, body and head rubbing, rolling, and a general kitten-like friskiness or major mellowness.

"Catnip is a dominant genetic response in cats, and it's highly prevalent," says cat geneticist Leslie Lyons of the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California at Davis. "A majority of cats respond to catnip, and some other wild species do, too, which means it's an old gene for cats."

Still, some kitties just say no. "Some cats don't like catnip and are actually repelled by it," says herbalist Gregory Tilford of Victor, Mont., co-author of "Herbs for Pets" (Bowtie, \$29.95). "My 18-year-old cat will walk clear around the edge of a room to avoid it." Very young cats are mostly oblivious to catnip's allure, possibly because catnip is believed to mimic sex pheromones to which they are temporarily unattuned.

Though some suggest a genetic propensity to catnip is breed-specific, with Asian-derived breeds such as Siamese, Burmese, Himalayans and Persians tending to be disinterested, Lyons says she has never heard of a breed predilection.

Heredity aside, if cats were given their druthers, most would pass up catnip in favor of valerian, says James Black, owner of Kooky Kat Catnip Company (www.kookykat.com), whose 60-acre farm is located about an hour from Vancouver, British Columbia.

"I've seen cats move their way through super-sacks of catnip to get to the valerian," says Black, noting it has a unique tendency to elicit drooling. (Rats are also attracted to this perennial plant, and the Pied Piper's mysterious power over Hamelin's rodent population has been attributed to a stash of valerian root in his pocket.)

Humans, however, are not always enthusiastic. Black says valerian is the least marketable of his herbal inventory because of its pungency, which he compares to "a combination of feta cheese and stinky socks."

Like catnip, Tilford says valerian has not been shown to have any toxic or adverse side effects.

"It's not so much a euphoric as a calming agent, and a very small percentage of cats have the reverse effect and are stimulated by it," says Tilford, noting that there is absolutely no connection between valerian and the common prescription drug Valium, though the incorrect association persists. "I've actually seen mountain lions rolling in wild valerian in the Rocky Mountains."

Another little-known catnip alternative is honeysuckle - specifically, *Lonicera tatarica* - a scraggly shrub with sweetly scented flowers.

Honeysuckle's popularity in cat circles began in the early 1990s, when Joanne and Henry Wegiel, owners of The Cat House (www.thecathouseinc.com), in Calgary, Alberta, discovered their cats were attracted to the huge bushes in their backyard. The couple soon started selling honeysuckle slices and sticks.

"Our anecdotal feedback is that about 90 percent of adult cats love it, which is significantly higher than catnip," says Joanne Wegiel, adding that only one out of 10 kittens responds. As with catnip, wild cats seem to hanker for honeysuckle along with their domesticated counterparts, and the Wegiels have been asked to introduce the tigers, snow leopards and cougars at the Calgary Zoo to its pleasures.

Black has a different take, estimating only 15 to 30 percent of cats respond to the honeysuckle products he sells. He also warns that cats can choke on the honeysuckle if they decide to gnaw it, and a mold that grows on the wet wood is a pathogen that can affect the upper respiratory tract.

As a result of these concerns, Black says he only sells a spray derived from the essential oil of the honeysuckle that can be spritzed on a toy to "rejuvenate" it.

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For their part, the Wegiels say that the pieces they sell are thick and strong, cut on a diagonal so they resist cracking. "It actually took a while to find a saw blade that would cut the honeysuckle without scorching," Joanne Wegiel says, adding that they have sold hundreds of thousands of pieces without any problem. Henry Wegiel adds that their honeysuckle wood is slow-dried for a minimum of two years before it is cut to eliminate any risk of mold or fungus.

What a rush. Or not.

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