I love many things in life and two of those things are my cats, Julian and Princeton. No matter the external or internal factors that affect my mood, my cats can always give me a boost. Not only can they make me laugh out loud, but they also may be able to better my health. Some research has shown caring for a cat can reduce stress, risk of stroke, anxiety, depression and lower cholesterol and triglycerides.

Something else that I am very passionate about is gardening. There are not too many other hobbies that directly impact your health as powerfully as gardening – and the benefits reach beyond growing your own food. Vegetable growing encourages healthier eating habits and gardening in general improves your mood, may lower osteoporosis and diabetes risk and can lead to better sleep patterns. According to a 2014 study getting your hands dirty in the garden can also give your immune system a boost.

If caring for cats and gardening both bring me benefits, can I combine the two into one super beneficial hobby?

GARDENING WITH CATS

Regardless if you personally care for a cat or not, chances are that a cat will cross your garden path. Several years ago the American Feral Cat Coalition estimates that there are approximately 60 million feral and homeless stray cats living in the U.S.

According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission there are over 77 million pet cats nationwide. Of these, about 56 percent or 43 million cats spend some time outside. That’s over 100 million cats living outside! Cats are becoming a common feature not only of our city streets and parks but also our landscaped backyards.

After speaking with many gardeners I could not find too many that said that there was a direct benefit of having cats in the garden. One told me that he had
moved his cat’s food bowl and litter pan closer to a fruit-producing tree to deter the squirrels and other wildlife from eating his crop.

Some gardeners believe that outdoor cats receive more exercise, maintain a healthier weight and benefit from the stimulation from the outside world. Pat O’Shea, a Master Gardener since 1999, currently cares for four kittens. In 2007 she started Kitten Stittin’, a home pet sitting business.

When O’Shea gardens she lets out two of her cats to join her, Snokey and Princess. “I have no idea how she manages to do it all at times and they do not leave my yard,” she says. She even takes Snokey for walks around the yard. “I have a harness and a leash and he loves smelling the bushes,” she adds.

O’Shea says that if you are lucky enough to have an enclosed pen or a cat that the cats would be great for the yard and the garden. She concludes that since she doesn’t have any kids to send through college she has built her cats an elaborate outdoor “cat condo,” which keeps them and her backyard wildlife safe.

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) says if you are going to garden with your cats you should first ensure that your cat has been seen by a veterinarian and you have discussed their individual healthcare plan including outdoor access. Like O’Shea, the AAFP recommends that you supervise your cat when outdoors. They also urge cat owners to bring their cats in once a year for a veterinary check-up and apply the proper vaccinations and parasite screenings and prevention. Cats that have a microchip and collar with a tag are much more likely to be reunited with their family if they were to be frightened and become lost.

**GARDENING WITHOUT CATS**

For many cat owners, like myself, the dangers of having a cat outside outweigh the benefits. In addition to parasites, cats can be injured from a wide range of external factors such as vehicles, domestic and wild animals and toxic plants.

Occasionally a feral or neighborhood cat can turn from a feline friend to a feline foil. If you have a cat that is using your beds as a litter pan there are a few solutions, although felines are territorial and it can be hard to break the pattern.

Removing bird feeders and only providing bird baths will help deter cats, but not entirely.

After speaking with many gardeners I could not find too many that said that there were a great benefit of having the cats in the garden. One told me that he had moved his cat’s food bowl and litter pan close to a fruit producing tree to deter the squirrels and other wildlife from eating his crop.
White vinegar can also be used as an invisible deterrent, though you will not want to use it near plants. A new application will need to be applied after each rain, and the good news is that vinegar is inexpensive. Potent plants such as rue (Ruta graveolens) and Coleus canina, also known as “screedy cat plant,” may also help deter cats. Lavender, pennyroyal, geranium and lemon thyme can also be grown as borders to keep cats away.

"With modern technology, you could also consider motion detectors that make a noise, produce a light, or set off a sprinkler or water spray action," Dr. Marcus Brown, DVM, the president of AAPP says.

He adds, "Fencing in your gardens can be very helpful to keep all unwanted visitors out including dogs, cats, rabbits, rodents, raccoons, and deer."

**GARDENING FOR CATS**

Although some cat caregivers may not give access to the outdoors, that doesn’t mean we can’t designate an area of our garden for them.

"Catnip is a great herb to grow in your garden and bring it in to share with your cats. There are many plants that are toxic to cats so be sure to check-out which ones are safe," Dr. Brown says.

Here are the top ten herbs that you can grow for your cats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMON NAME</th>
<th>SCIENTIFIC NAME</th>
<th>EFFECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cat thyme</td>
<td>Thymus marum</td>
<td>Will act as an insecticide similar to catnip, for cats who don’t respond particularly strong to catnip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamomile</td>
<td>Matricaria recutita</td>
<td>Relieves stress and nervousness, calms cats, soothes itchy skin, kills moss, and flies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catnip</td>
<td>Nepeta cataria</td>
<td>Benefits humans and cats. Contains natural cortisone which will help with allergies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dandelion</td>
<td>Taraxacum officinale</td>
<td>Medicinal properties reduce reducing skin problems such as itching. Some veterinary herbalists use them as a diuretic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echinacea</td>
<td>Echinacea purpurea</td>
<td>Natural diuretic can help with infections or allergies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldenseal</td>
<td>Hydrastis canadensis</td>
<td>Benefits humans, dogs and cats, Can soothe allergies and help endocrine and digestive problems. May help with arthritis as it has anti-inflammatory properties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licorice</td>
<td>Glycyrrhiza glabra</td>
<td>Benefits humans, dogs and cats, Can soothe allergies and help endocrine and digestive problems. May help with arthritis as it has anti-inflammatory properties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerian</td>
<td>Valeriana officinalis</td>
<td>Strong smelling herb is known to relax humans and alleviate stress. With essential oils, lean cats into fast sleepy feelings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cat caring and gardening will always bring me joy, but for now I will keep the two interests separate. If my cats are going to enjoy my plants from my garden they will do so indoors. Do you have a positive story to share on how your outdoor cat helps around the garden? Connect with us at facebook.com/CritterCompanions (and/or Florida Gardening magazine’s facebook).”

Kenny Coogan, CPRW-IA, is a regular pet and garden columnist and has authored an ecological themed children’s book titled A Tenet Named Trey (And other odd titled animals that like to play). He has a B.S. in animal behavior and is a certified bird trainer through the International Avian Trainers Certification Board. Please search Critter Companions by Kenny Coogan on Facebook to learn more.

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