



Catnip Anyone?

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Most plants we grow, indoors or out, are either useful to us, like vegetables, or attractive additions to our gardens and landscapes. One plant your pet cat will thank you for growing is catnip (*Nepeta cataria*).

Catnip is a perennial member of the mint family native to parts of Asia and Europe. Like most mints, it is fairly easy to grow. If anything, mints are rather boisterous plants, always looking to expand their range, especially given their preferred conditions of sun and plenty of moisture. They can be restrained to some degree by growing them in partly shaded, drier parts of the garden. In the case of catnip, given a sunny window, it is perfectly happy to be grown as a houseplant, which is how I grow it for our inside cat.

The scalloped-edged, pointy leaves are an attractive medium green and slightly hairy on the undersides. Stems are characteristically square. If grown outside, plants usually bloom once during the summer. The flowers are small and white with purple spots. Like all mints, they are attractive to honeybees and other pollinators. Catnip is easily grown from seed and will self-seed if the flowers are left to mature on the plant so remove them after blooming if this is not a desirable trait.

A cat's response to catnip may vary but can include rubbing or rolling on the plant, sniffing, licking, chewing on the leaves, vocalizing, drooling as well as other crazy antics. It's not just domestic felines that find catnip alluring; big cats too are drawn to this aromatic herb. Some cats, however, show no interest in catnip. Although scientists are not sure why it affects some animals and not others, they suspect this might be a heritable trait. It is also possible that reactions might be affected by sex, age or neuter status. Typically, domestic cats need to be around 6 months old or so before they show a response to catnip.

So, what is in catnip that cats find so attractive? When plants are rubbed or bruised, a chemical compound called nepetalactone is released. It is thought that this chemical stimulates sensory

neurons leading to changes in a cat's brain activity. For most cats, this euphoric mood lasts between 5 and 15 minutes but it does vary in both response time and intensity. While some cats become playful or aggressive, others become calm and mellow. Not all cats respond well to catnip so monitor your cat's behavior after exposure to be sure he/she is enjoying the stimulus. Cats that are anxious or nervous may not appreciate the mind-altering affects of this plant.

Because most cats are attracted to catnip, it can be useful as a training tool. Attaching some dried leaves to their scratching posts may be enough to convince your pet to use the post instead of the sofa.

Our cat, Bruno, really enjoys rubbing his head on and then eating a couple of leaves once or twice a week. If catnip is grown outside, leaves can be harvested and dried and used later. The essential oil is most concentrated before flowering so gather leaves in early summer and dry in a warm, dark place on screens. One former pet cat liked it when I stuffed some dried leaves in a small paper bag and rolled it up tight so she could bat it around. Because the oils dissipate readily from dried leaves, it is recommended that they be stored in the freezer.



Catnip is not just for cats. Humans have used it mostly as a tea for several ailments including digestive disorders, nervous conditions, and respiratory problems. Its use was documented as early as 1735 in the General Irish Herbal. Leaves have been used as a flavoring for both main dishes and beverages. Even now it is served as a bedtime tea with calming properties similar to chamomile.

Catnip also has been shown to have mosquito repellent properties like a number of herbs. Perhaps wild felines figured this out before us humans noticed its compelling affects on our pet cats.

For information on growing catnip or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.