

Purr-fect design

Issue 41 Words: Joanna Griffith

OUTDOORS



Cats wipe out a million native animals a day in Australia, leading some local governments to consider 24/7 cat confinement orders, in line with laws governing dogs. With change afoot, what design solutions are out there for keeping roaming moggies at home? Veterinarian Joanna Griffith investigates.

Cats as pets: it's a divisive subject. But whether you love them or loathe them, cats are here to stay. As an animal lover and cat owner, I adore cats, but as a wildlife veterinarian frequently dealing with the terrible injuries they inflict on our native animals, I'm conflicted.

Cats have contributed to the extinction of dozens of Australia's native mammals and birds, and are listed as a key threat to many currently endangered animals. Due to these devastating effects, there have been calls for pet cats to be permanently confined to their owner's property. Cat owners might be surprised to find that their smooch puss is a highly effective killer: according to [research in Canberra](#) that followed cats for 12 months, 70 per

cent of cats were bringing home prey monthly, and 6 per cent of cats were bringing home prey weekly. And that's only the prey they decided to share!

Sunset-to-sunrise cat curfews, enacted decades ago by some local governments, do not reduce hunting of prey species active during the day, such as birds and reptiles, so an increasing number of local councils around Australia are passing orders requiring owners to permanently confine their cats, particularly in new suburbs or those adjacent to bush habitats.

But it's not just about the wildlife. As a veterinarian I see the whole spectrum of injuries and disease occurring as a result of cats roaming. Cats fight each other, causing serious injuries and spreading Feline Immunodeficiency Virus. They are very frequently injured severely or killed on the roads. Dogs will kill or severely injure cats entering their yards. Cats may stray and become lost. Cats can cause neighbourhood disputes. And of course there is toxoplasmosis, a disease caught from the faeces of cats that hunt or are fed raw meat; it's dangerous to an unborn baby if contracted by pregnant women, and frequently lethal to our native mammals.

There are many good reasons to confine cats; happily there are a number of ways to do this that are effective and aesthetically pleasing.

Confinement indoors

Some owners will confine their cats inside the house, simply by closing the doors. Although this is a cheap and valid option, it does require constant vigilance, and training of visitors. An important aspect of house confinement is keeping the cat enriched to reduce boredom and lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes and urinary tract disease. Options include active play, a variety of rotating toys including those that make a cat work for their food, cat trees and basking points, litter trays (one per cat plus one to reduce conflict), tall scratching posts, and views out of windows.

Some owners have taken these ideas further by modifying their house to accommodate their feline friends. Cats use vertical space, so clearing off shelves with easy access points, or even building cat walkways or tunnels along walls or across ceilings can significantly improve your cat's day, are a lot of fun, and can be great to look at. Some cats can be taught to enjoy walking outside your property on harnesses, although they tend to walk you, rather than the other way around. Cats should never be left harnessed without supervision.



Wowowa's Casa de Gatos 'house of cats' project is a renovation to a tiny worker's cottage in North Fitzroy to make space for a travel-loving couple and their four fur babies: two dogs and two cats. For the cats, a climbable wall surface was installed with vertical spaces for the cats to roam without needing to go outside. Images above and feature image: Martina Gemmola

Cat runs

You will have a happier cat if they can use some outdoor space. One option is a roofed cat run or enclosure, which can be made from metal mesh or netting.

Galvanised steel mesh: Mesh cat runs can be stand-alone cages – attractive for cat owners who rent – or built in permanently to your property. They tend to be more expensive than other solutions, but some are available as DIY kits, which can reduce costs. If built in, they are best permanently connected to your house by a tunnel and cat door, allowing the cat to choose when to access the run; this is particularly important during extreme weather, or for anxious animals. Unless you invest in an energy-rated pet door, there is a minor consideration that a connecting cat door can be draughty and may be frequently opened by your cat, resulting in poor thermal performance of the room it is connected to. The ideal place to situate a cat door is away from the main heated area. Cat doors can be installed in most walls and in single-glazed windows made of safety glass.

Netting: Traditionally cat runs are made of galvanised mesh, however a number of companies offer netting as an alternative. The choice of netting is important. Nets originally made for fishing or sports are not suitable, as these are designed to sag, which can require re-tensioning over time, or could result in the cat becoming caught and entangled if it attempts to climb the sagging netting. Pre-stretched heat-set, UV-stabilised netting designed specifically for cats is preferable, and will last longer. Netting may be designed to be low visibility, reducing the visual impact of your enclosure. Most netting enclosures are custom designed to suit your property, making maximum use of the space you have available.

Furnishings: Remembering that cats enjoy vertical space, you can significantly increase the useable size of your enclosure by providing perches, walkways and cat climbing furniture

within it.



Panache (Burmese) and Mia (Abyssinian) love catching the sun, chasing butterflies and ‘bird watching’. They used to be kept in at night only, but due to the risk of cars were grounded for life. “At first the cats looked for a way out of their netted enclosure but soon accepted the new normal,” says owner Michael. The enclosure surrounds the laundry door and clothesline so it’s still easy to hang the washing, with the cats keeping company.

Cat fencing

Confining your cat to your backyard using fencing has a number of advantages. It may be cheaper to install cat-proof fencing than an enclosure, and, as you continue to share the space with your cat, allows maximum use of the backyard for both you and your pet. Although good fencing will prevent neighbours’ cats from entering your backyard, your cat can still hunt any prey species that come in.

Before starting you will need to seal off any gaps in or underneath the fence, and trim back trees and shrubs or provide tree collars to prevent climbing. You will also need to remove or discourage access to any launching places, such as garbage bins or planters. Fencing alone may be adequate, if it is tall enough, made of metal to reduce grip, and without horizontal rails (for example Good Neighbour fencing). Gates can be a weak point, and some options outlined below include special gate kits to reduce escape over gates. If fencing is not enough, or difficult to alter, you may need to consider fence 'additions' to reduce escapes.

There are a number of DIY guides for building cat fencing available online from councils and welfare organisations. It's a good idea to follow these guides to minimise risk to your cat.

Floppy fencing: 'Floppy fencing' your backyard involves using angled brackets or angled PVC pipe attached at regular intervals inside your fence, with netting or wire mesh running between them to create a barrier. This can be a relatively low cost DIY project.

Electric fencing: Cat electric fencing – such as the Pingg-String from Suregard and SmartCats StayHome cat fence – are a low-visibility, relatively low-cost option for cat confinement. They are fixed to the top of fences, or angled just inside your own fence using brackets, and can be attached to outdoor power points or use solar panels. The electric fence must be specific for cats, so that the electric shock is appropriate for their body size; livestock fences are not appropriate.

However, the RSPCA discourages the use of electric fences. In order to learn to avoid them, the cat must receive at least one shock. In addition, cats generally do not respond well to punishment, often increasing anxiety or redirecting aggression to other animals or people when they are frightened. They may also simply 'run through' the fence if terrified.

My personal experience with a cat electric fence has been positive, particularly when renting. Ours had a low visual impact and few attachment points, making it easy to move between rental properties and acceptable to our landlords, and it was very cost effective. It did require some ongoing maintenance when wires shorted, but with proper tensioning this would be less of a problem.

Cat containment paddles: Cat containment paddles such as those from Oscillot provide a good alternative to other fencing modifications for high fences (minimum 1.8 metres). As a cat jumps it reaches to the top of the fence with its forepaws, contacting the paddle. The paddle spins and the cat loses its grip, dropping back into the yard. It can be installed yourself, and depending on the yard size, can be economic. This fencing is approved by the Animal Welfare League of Australia.



Images: Oscillot

The way forward?

Without a doubt cats make delightful pets, but the carnage wrought by cats, feral and domestic, has reduced biodiversity in our urban, periurban, rural and wilderness habitats, and roaming is a dangerous lifestyle for cats. With so many options for cat confinement available – many cost effective, cosmetic and discreet – as a wildlife veterinarian and a cat lover, it is my fervent wish that more cat owners embrace responsible cat ownership by confining their cat to their property.

More info:

www.awlqld.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/cat-safe-booklet.pdf

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