

Crazy for Catnip

Why this magic herb keeps some (but not all) felines feeling groovy

by ARNA COHEN

To 'nip or not to 'nip—that is the question.

'Tis nobler for kitty owners to follow the dictum of “just say no,” or to grant their pets the occasional sniff of medicinal herbs and, in so doing, liven up their lives?

While some might hesitate to let their cats experiment, experts agree that, for the majority of felines, there's nothing to ponder: Life is much more interesting with catnip.

A member of the mint family, *Nepeta cataria* contains nepetalactone, a chemical that takes cats to their crazy place. Scientists don't know exactly how catnip acts on the feline brain, but they theorize that nepetalactone mimics cats' “happy” pheromones and stimulates the corresponding neural receptors.

The resulting effects are well-known: A few whiffs can make even the laziest kitty couch potato roll, rub, flip, race around the house, drool, and generally lose his dignity.

Catnip revs up almost every cat species, from 400-pound lions to pint-sized sand cats. Tigers seem to be resistant—and not every domestic cat responds. It takes a while

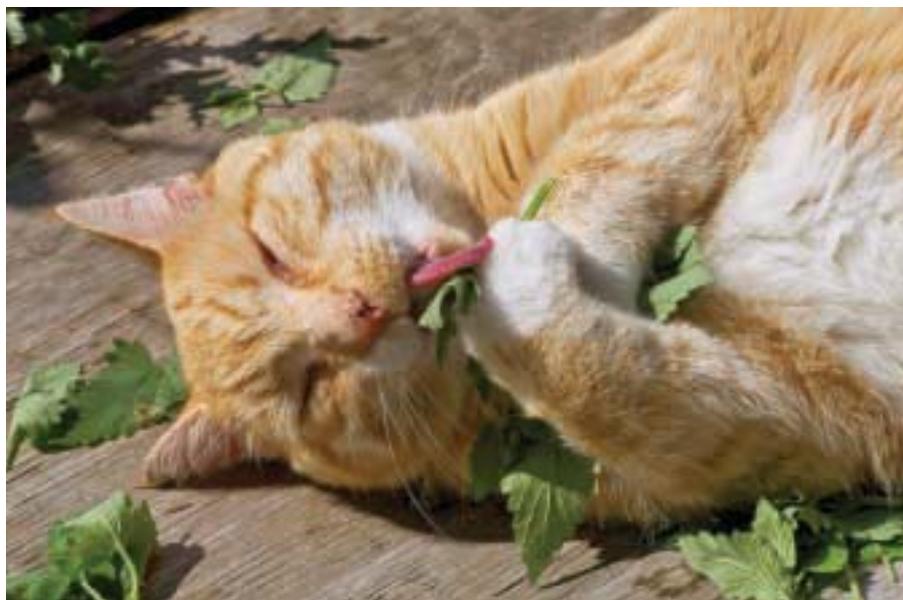
for kittens to acquire the taste; an estimated 20 to 30 percent never do.

Catnip sensitivity is hereditary, and if a cat doesn't possess a genetic predilection for the herb, he will forever turn up his nose. It's not that he can't smell it; it simply does nothing for him. Three-year-old Huxley, a brown tabby who lives with Rhonda Donald in Washington, N.C., seems to be one of the immune. “He doesn't give a poop about it,” says Donald. “He'll sniff it and maybe bat at it a little, then walk away. Or sit on it like it's not there.”

Cubsy, a white cat in Los Angeles, Calif., has the catnip gene. When 'nip time rolls around, he waits expectantly while owner Maria Aguilar sprinkles his favorite blend on the floor. He sniffs it, nibbles it, and flops down, rolling from side to side and rubbing his cheeks in the stuff—the epitome of cat nirvana.

For cats blessed with an affinity for the plant, it can provide variety and stimulation, says Beth Adelman, a New York City cat behavior consultant. And if your pet is stressed, catnip may help him relax. The staff of the Cat Care Society in Lakewood, Colo., finds that it can pacify an angry cat or bring a shy one out of his shell; caregivers at the SPCA Serving Erie County in Tonawanda, N.Y., use it to encourage stressed-out kitties to eat.

But before you start thinking of the





'Nip Tips The bliss-inducing catnip herb originated in Mediterranean climates and was brought to the New World by colonists as an essential part of their medicine cabinet, used in tea form as a remedy for colds, indigestion, and insomnia. Catnip cat toys were first sold in America just after the turn of the 20th century by A.C. Daniels, a specialist in veterinary medicines who offered hollow wooden balls and loose catnip to fill them. Today's toys take every shape imaginable, from fish and mice to former presidents. Products are available in all price ranges, from a few dollars for a bag of felt rodents to double digits for a plaything with organically grown herb. Follow these tips to make sure your pet is getting the most out of her foray into catnip.

- ▶ **THE QUALITY AND THE FRESHNESS** of the catnip have a lot to do with the intensity of the animal's experience, says Leon Seidman, founder of Cosmic Pet Products. Low-quality catnip consists mostly of seeds and stems that may not have enough nepetalactone to stimulate a cat. If your 'nip lover doesn't react to an inexpensive toy, it may contain old herb or so little of it that your cat can't detect it, says Seidman. (Or he just may have champagne tastes.)
- ▶ **CATNIP'S POTENCY FADES WITH AGE**, so buy it in small amounts that you'll use fairly quickly. Catnip also loses strength when exposed to air and light; keep it fresh by storing it in the freezer in an airtight container. If you prefer to use catnip toys, you can refresh them by "marinating" them in loose catnip or spraying them with natural catnip oil.
- ▶ **ORGANIC CATNIP IS PESTICIDE-FREE**, good for cats who like to nibble their 'nip. And cat owners with green thumbs can grow their own. A \$2 packet of seeds will produce enough plants to keep a cat in nepetalactone clover all summer, with extra to dry for the dark days of winter, when we all need a little stimulation.

herb as a panacea for all that might ail your kitty, you need to know how your cat takes his catnip—and how he reacts to it.

Cats get the "catnip crazies" when they sniff the dried plant and inhale the oils, but eating it has a sedative effect. 'Nipper madness can take a few forms—the drooling fool who rubs himself in it and squints his eyes in delight; the possessed creature who claws the rug, disembowels his toy, and tears around the house; and the occasional 'nipper tripper who becomes hyped up and territorial, swatting and growling at anyone who tries to get near. After the initial reaction, most cats mellow out for a while, staring blissfully into space.

Judy Miller's two cats love catnip—maybe a little too much. "There's drama if I don't put two piles of catnip down fast enough," says the Cambridge, Mass., resident. Cleo likes to chow down on her pile, while Lily is a roller and a rubber—and a growler. "If Cleo tries to eat Lily's catnip, Lily growls and swats at her. And Cleo is usually the dominant one."

A cat's body language will provide clues as to whether she's enjoying the experience. "You can usually tell if your cat is overstimulated by her body posture, especially the position of the ears," says veterinarian Brenda Griffin, an adjunct associate professor of shelter medicine at the University of Florida. "They will flatten and rotate sideways—airplane ears." If you see this reaction, Griffin says, stand clear for a bit, just in case your cat mistakes you for an oversized mouse.

If your feline friend does get overstimulated, you don't have to deprive him completely. "Just don't try to pet him or pick him up during his catnip experience," advises Adelman. (You can also give him his catnip in a separate room, along with a toy to destroy.)

A catnip episode typically lasts 5 to 10 minutes, after which the cat loses interest. Offering more catnip won't work; it takes up to an hour or two for her to "reset" and become susceptible again. And the novelty can wear off if she is exposed too often—so don't overdo the revelry.

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