

By Tooth and Nail: Feline Household Destruction

Many people choose cats because they think they are an easy pet to live with, one that does not require obedience training like a dog does. While they may not need to learn to come when called or heel at your side, by tooth and nail, untrained cats can cause tremendous household destruction. Destruction by tooth would include noshing on houseplants and eating inappropriate materials such as dirt, leather, and wool — a habit referred to as pica. Destruction by nail refers to those old feline classics, using the furniture as a scratching post and the curtains as a jungle gym.

Feline destruction can be resolved in a number of ways: by managing the problem, by distracting the cat away from the objects of desire, and/or by retraining the cat. A combination of these three can solve almost any problem.



Houseplants often fall victim to young cats. For the cat that loves to eat plants, the problem can be managed by turning tabletop plants into hanging plants or by putting them in one room that is kept off-limits to felines. (Giving your plants away and learning to love plastic and silk flowers is another possibility.)

Another option is to distract the cat by making the houseplants harder to reach, meanwhile growing flats of catnip and wheat grass in a more easily accessible area. Praise and reward interest in the appropriate "cat plants." This should satisfy the cat's craving for fresh vegetation. And if that doesn't do it, add some string beans or fruit to the cat's dinner bowl.

Or you can attempt to retrain the cat by spraying the leaves of plants with an anti-chew agent especially formulated for plants and attaching balloons or double-stick tape to the planters. Cats avoid sites of loud noises (popped balloons) or surfaces that feel tacky to their touch.

In cases that involve pica, the cat should first be examined by a veterinarian to make sure it is not suffering from any sort of physical problem or metabolic imbalance.

For the cat that eats/chews inappropriate objects, managing the problem would take the form of keeping objects that the cat is attracted to in drawers, closets, and other closed containers.

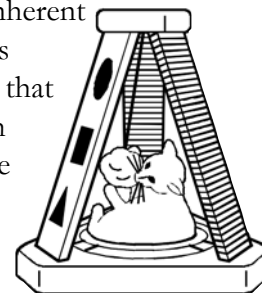
Distract the cat from desired objects by providing plenty of playthings. Some experts feel that chewing inappropriate items is a sign of boredom and isolation. Increasing the cat's exercise sessions and rotating toys might bring about a welcome change.

Introduction of a second cat as a playmate might also alleviate the problem but should only be considered if the owner truly desires a second cat. Adding cats to a household is stressful at first to the existing occupant and numerous misbehaviors may result such as fighting or inappropriate litterbox habits. Stress-related health disorders such as Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease can also occur.

Attempt to retrain the cat through dietary measures. Put the cat on a premium quality dry food with a dequate fiber in it. Feed only that food and no other supplements or treats and keep the cat away from his former pseudofood items for at least two weeks. After two weeks, douse the desired object with an anti-chew spray and reintroduce it to your cat.

To deal with the Number One destruction complaint — scratching the furniture, manage the problem by making sure furniture and drapery materials are tactilely unattractive to cats. Generally most smooth cotton fabrics such as chintz or silky fabrics such as parachute cloth hold little interest for cats. Their preferences run to the rough, bumpy, textured surfaces like Haitian cloth, Herculon, raw silk, and leather. If the furniture pre-dates the cat, use of heavy canvas slip covers or a comforter as a furniture protector should be considered. Of course, there are always plastic slipcovers for the truly desperate! Trimming the cat's nails every two weeks will keep them blunt and minimize the damage done by any errant scratching.

Distract the cat from furniture by providing a suitable scratching post. Cats have an inherent need to scratch in order to remove the dead nail sheaths from around their claws, thus allowing the new nails to grow out. Provide a sturdy, wide-based, rough textured post that is at least three feet tall. The post should be covered in sisal, burlap, or a similar rough fabric. A natural tree trunk that has been debugged is also acceptable. Keep it near the cat's favorite napping place or by a window, for the urge to scratch is often strongest upon awakening.



Scratching is also a territorial marking behavior. Cats often choose to mark an item that is prominent in the territory such as the corner of the sofa or wall. It is marked as a visual sign post, plus cats have a scent glands in their feet which are also used to mark items with their scent. (This is why even declawed cats will “scratch” and mark items.) Therefore it is important to initially place an appropriate scratching post beside or in front of the items the cat usually scratches, then move it slowly to the place where you would prefer it to be. Retrain the cat away from scratching on furniture by making favorite scratching pieces undesirable by covering them with double-stick tape, balloons, tin foil, or contact paper (sticky side out).

The sound of human nails run over the scratching post often entices the cat to the post. Praise the cat if that occurs. Dragging a ribbon or other interactive toy over or around the post also attracts the cat in the right direction. Several times a month, sprinkle some potent catnip on the post to increase its desirability if your cat responds positively to this herb.

By providing for a cat's physical and mental needs and keeping its environment stimulating through the use of kitty greens, appropriate scratching posts and challenging interactive toys; much of the destruction caused by tooth and nail can be avoided.

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