

How to spoil your cat on a budget

By Sally Schloss for WebVet



It's possible to provide for your cat and keep it entertained, while still staying on a budget -- you just need a little creativity. Especially considering the current state of the economy, people are looking for ways to cut corners every day. But your cat shouldn't have to suffer because of it. Read on for some ways to keep your cat healthy and happy while staying on a budget.

Finding Oliver

Elizabeth Wise was looking for a young, "good ol' boy" cat (hardy, smart and spirited) to chase her blues away. She and her husband had lost their two beloved, elderly cats, within months of each other. The mood around the house definitely needed lifting.

"I went to the animal shelter," Wise said, "and walked past many cages before I saw this medium-longhaired, ginger tabby. His fat, fluffy tail was bigger than his whole body. His eyes locked onto mine and he just sat there staring at me as if he was evaluating me! That was it. I knew this was the cat."

The 12-week-old tabby was called Oliver and "since he answered to that name, it stuck." His playmate Sasha, a little black and white beauty, was adopted shortly after. "Their entertainment value was priceless," Wise said. "We couldn't remember when we'd laughed so much."

Because these were to be indoor cats, Wise went about turning her house into a kitty playpen so that her cats would be equally entertained.

Below are some affordable ways to make your cat happy.

Kitty playhouse

Wise took very sturdy, large cardboard cartons, cut a cat-sized hole in a bottom corner and another hole in the top (after sealing the top flaps with duct tape).

She threw a small, wadded-up piece of paper inside the box, and her cats went crazy. "Not only do they bat at each other through the holes, but they also chase in and out of the box."

When the cats are not playing with the cartons, they find that the boxes become a perfect haven for a cat nap.

Attach two or three together with duct tape (vertically or horizontally) and you've created a kitty play penthouse.

"What's great about the boxes is that they cost nothing; you can play with your cats by dangling yarn in front of a hole, scratching on the outside (drives them nuts) or throwing any number of things inside. Or, they can amuse themselves," Wise said.

Bugs

Not everyone will be willing to adopt another of Wise's no-cost, pet-toy solutions: catching insects and bringing them indoors for your cat's hunting pleasure. Oliver's and Sasha's favorite insects are moths, cicadas and crickets. Because of the health risk Wise makes it a rule—absolutely NO spiders.

What can be better from a cat's point of view than something small, alive and moving? "They usually don't eat them," Wise said. "Just torture and carry them proudly around in their mouth," she laughs. "If you're not squeamish about bugs they make the best 'toys.'"

If you decide to start offering bugs to your cat, check with your vet first to find out what insects are safe in your area.

Kitty stairs to paradise

Another Wise innovation for affordable kitty toys was to make use of the recessed space near the top of the vaulted ceiling of her living room. A small landing, tucked below a triangular, windowed view of her front yard and street made a cozy platform for cat beds. She mounted inexpensive, unfinished wood planks, covered in carpet, to the walls. Strategically placed, these "steps" became Oliver's and Sasha's leaping route to their room with a view.

To imitate this idea in your own space:

- Use two walls that meet at a protruding corner. That allows you to stack the stairs in a spiral pattern using both sides of the wall. If you don't have usable corner walls available, simply stagger the steps up one wall.
- Use 1" thick, solid wood boards, 1" to 2" wide by approximately 19" deep. (Adjust to the size of space available).
- Put them a cat length apart.
- Attach to the wall with shelving brackets.
- Glue carpet remnants to the wood. Cover the edges as well for a finished look. (Reinforce the carpet edges with a staple gun.)
- If there isn't a landing space at the top, simply create one by turning the top step into a platform, making it much wider and deeper.

More cheap toy tips from Wise

- Pipe cleaners
- Empty toilet paper rolls
- A leaf or twig from outside (check with your vet about which plant leaves are safe)
- A bird feather
- An old sock stuffed with catnip and knotted
- Rabbit's foot with the keychain removed. Cats love the fur.

Affordable outdoor fun for your indoor cat

Wise's cats are lucky. Although they live in a city, they also live in a house with a backyard. She places bird feeders just outside her windows and a table or couch up against the inside wall. Her cats are able to watch hummingbirds, blue jays and cardinals flitting about, mesmerizing them for hours.

One more treat is taking each cat out on a harness while Wise is gardening. If trained from kittenhood, cats usually do fine wearing a harness. Under Wise's watchful eye, the harnessed cat is attached to a long rope that is secured to a tree. The fenced yard keeps the cats from being "spooked" by other animals. The cats get enough rope to wander close by and Wise gets their company.

For apartment dwellers, a secure, screened window with a cat ledge beside it, or balcony, will work. Make sure no harm can come to your cat by falling or running away. Also, other animals should not be able to get in.

Words from the Wise

"Spend your money on things that matter," Wise said. "When Oliver had an allergic reaction to ear mite medication, his lymph nodes swelled up, blocking his intestine. My vet recommended surgery, which was going to cost a thousand dollars. He said it would save his life. Oliver was the smartest, funniest cat I've ever known -- a living prescription for stress relief. I put my money on him."

Today, Oliver is a healthy, boisterous kitty who rules the Wise household.

Finally, the very best economy tip of all is to play with your cat every day, as often as possible. That will take care of your cat's essential physical and emotional needs, which goes a long way in keeping your cat happy and healthy -- for free.

Credit: Reviewed by Amy I. Attas, VMD,