

The Benefits of Essential Cat Furniture

By Tommy Westerhold, Owner, Feline Design Cat Furniture

Just after 5AM this morning, my trusty 16 year-old cat, Jasper, jumped up on the bed, walked across my wife's chest, and across mine for the fourth time, signifying that it was breakfast time for him and Stormy & Misty - two young all black sisters, rescued from a kill shelter in North Carolina. I put on my slippers and made my way into the kitchen, with the year-old kittens in the lead and Jasper taking up the rear. After I got their breakfast in their bowls, I started down to the basement, where they'll eat & will remain to let their old dad get another hour of shuteye. Once again, the little girls raced down, with Jasper taking those steps a little more cautiously behind me. At the foot of the stairs, a scene unfolded much the same it has for over 30 years with these & our many other cats (way too numerous to mention names, here). After a few obligatory gulps of their premium quality cat food (no meat by-products in this house!), the girls spread out, with Stormy picking the taller cat tree close to the stairs and effortlessly shooting straight up to the top perch, and Misty preferring to get a good stretch on a tall sisal rope scratching post before scrambling up a different 3-level tree and rolling over upside down to wait for me to pass by & rough her up a little. Jasper bolted down the length of the basement floor (defying his advanced years), and with two bounds, scaled a short pedestal scratcher & came to rest on a taller 30" one, and gazed out onto the pre-dawn darkness of our snowy Pennsylvania woods. Each cat found his or her favorite place to share this precious time with their obedient human companion - and all of it involved cat furniture.

This article is meant to define what essential cat furniture is, and to identify some of the different types of cat furniture. We will also discuss why we see certain cat furniture as "must-have" gear for the house cat(s). It's is written from the perspective of someone who has lived with cats forever, and also from that of a cat furniture maker, after more than three decades of experience dealing with cat owners and with better purveyors of pet supplies such as Braxton's Animal Works. We hope this information will be useful to you, the prospective or new cat parent, as well as to people who have lived with cats for a while. My goal here is to improve your feline companion's domain with

the aim of helping him/her live a happier, more fulfilling nine lives.

Stormy & Misty each came with 18 perfectly sharp little daggers on their feet - otherwise known as claws (10 front & 8 back). It had been a while since I had kittens in the house, and so it was kind of a reeducation for me to watch how these two came to discover all of the ways that claws are useful to a cat. Kittens are perpetually playful, and it was so much fun to watch as they chased after imaginary prey and grabbed it up with their nimble little feet. The wonderful thing about their deeply ingrained instincts was that many times, they would catch a toy on a string, and then drag the whole thing, wand & all, into some dark corner in order to prepare it for dinner. They also began to use their claws to climb and to stretch out their finely tuned hunting machines, with all of the attached muscles and tendons and ligaments & such. But mostly, it was scratching that was evident from the start.

Scratching can cause a problem for human companions if they don't know how to approach this behavior. You'll quickly learn that even when our cat doesn't mean to cause you any distress, there are times when you end up bleeding. This use of claws is simply a defensive reaction. When a human, many times her size, gets a little too aggressive or annoying or even affectionate, it can trigger a defensive mechanism in the cat, and your sliced up hand is the souvenir of that encounter. So, let me just advise the new cat person to be mindful of the size difference between the two, and also to respect some invisible (but totally understandable) boundary which the cat has set up around her. It's wise to remember, as well, that when it seems that a cat doesn't like being pet somewhere on her body, remembering this is a kindness when you are petting that cat. And one of the greatest benefits of having a pet is that it makes us kinder human beings.

Unfortunately, scratching is probably more of a problem when your cat has chosen to scratch up a favorite chair, and starts to become a liability, due to the fact that you are now thinking about having to replace that chair. So let me introduce you to my little friend, the scratching post. My ideal scratching post is relatively tall - at least 24", but 30" or more is even better. It has a base which is wide enough to keep the whole thing from tipping over, and it has to be covered with something that your cat will scratch on. I personally prefer sisal rope. Specifically, 3/8" diameter Brazilian or Mexican sisal

rope (due to its longevity). If you expose your cat to this rope at an early age, she'll always prefer scratching it, and will leave that chair alone. Another advantage of sisal rope is simply its feel. It has so many random little areas where a claw can dig into. Many times, this scratching activity is just to tune up the claws, removing the dead sheath and exposing a newly sharpened claw. Also, it's always been my belief that there is a territorial aspect to this scratching, meaning that your cat needs to establish & maintain her territory by marking the scratch post with her scent.

Your best scratching post will have a platform on the top that your cat can climb up to or jump up to. This platform is useful simply because it allows the cat to jump up onto some approved surface (better than the stove top or the kitchen counter, for example). And if the post is somewhere near the level of a windowsill, it lets the cat monitor all of the activity outside. A useful scratching post which is well positioned in your home is the best cat accessory, right after a decent feeding area and appropriate litter boxes. When a cat gets done eating & pooping, he's likely to launch into some serious scratching, believe me. And I've had cats who scratch on a post like they mean to take it apart.

There are variations of the scratch post I've described, here. Some cats prefer scratching on carpet instead of sisal rope, and we make both types. In addition to that, there is a woven sisal material, which can be substituted as the scratching surface. There are cats who like to stretch out horizontally to do their scratching, as opposed to going straight up (these are the ones who are ruining your heirloom oriental rug). We make a variety of horizontal scratchers to appease these critters.

So, a strong, sturdy scratching post is the #1 piece of essential cat furniture. And, yes, this all comes from a guy who has a house full of cat furniture of all descriptions. So the following advice will come as no surprise: What I suggest is a scratching post in every part of the house where your cat comes to hang out with you. Into the room with the cat comes that scratching instinct. And why wouldn't you want to help your cat satisfy her instinct in the TV room, as well as the den, and maybe even in the bedroom? Wherever your cat is likely to spend some significant time, you should place a scratching post or better yet, a more complex piece of cat furniture.

Let me describe a modest cat tree, or condo, to you. Start with a reasonably sized base will accommodate at least two levels. One could be a bed of some sort. That bed can be a carpeted tube or cave, or even a box. The next level is often supported by a sisal rope scratching post, and this level is often also a bed or a perch. Many times, that second level comes up to where your head ends up when you're relaxing on a sofa, so that your cat can lounge about at roughly the same level as your head, eyes, and mouth - which all give your kitty a lot of comfort and satisfaction. From this vantage point, she can easily take a playful swat at you if she's feeling frisky.

There are some great items in between the two types I've mentioned so far. These generally have a wide, stable base, a tall scratching post, and then a bed of some type on top. Jasper favors this one because it is very versatile. He can get a rambunctious scratch on, and then he can choose to jump up to that bed and watch birds, or just to put in an hour or so of his 16 hours of daily cat naps.

There are taller, multi-level cat trees which are suitable for households with several cats. Feline Design's tallest trees stand at about 53", and have at least three beds or perches. Our beds & perches are designed to allow large breed cats, such as Maine Coons, which can weigh up to 18 lbs. at maturity, to stretch out or curl up and have a long, cozy nap. One advantage of these bigger trees is that there are very tall sisal rope columns incorporated into the design. They can let your cat stretch out while scratching, and will allow him to either climb or jump, or both. Our multi-level cat trees are laid out to let your cat get up to his desired level easily with one or two simple jumps.

So, there are at least two kinds of essential furniture you may wish to consider for your cherished feline companion: 1) One or more sisal rope scratching posts, at least 24" high, and possibly with a platform on top, and 2) a cat tree/condo with 2 or more levels that also has sisal rope on the supporting posts. These cat accessories described here will soon become your cat's favorite places in the house. If it's made with integrity and love, such as my brand, Feline Design, it'll last many years. I often hear that one of my cat condos or trees has outlasted a generation of cats, and is on the next generation and still looking pretty nice.

As I am finishing writing this, my three cats are sleeping in their perches, after a morning of chasing each other around and climbing up their cat trees and looking down upon the human world for a time. Soon enough, I expect to hear the sound of scratching once again, probably in the TV room, where I'll retire with my cats to take in the day's human events and to spend a little time discussing them with Jasper, Stormy & Misty, who will probably just hear something like "Soon, I'll go get you some treats or catnip toys, or maybe we'll go back downstairs to explore!"