



The Cat's Meow

Catios provide the perfect spot for a fix of the great outdoors

BY CATHERINE HESS

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Serena, catio designer Cynthia Chomos' cat, has two catios—this large one and a smaller window box. #

Every now and then, on nice days, Krista Rakovan would let her cats onto the back deck for some supervised sunbathing. She watched how much Julius, Ginger and Kobe loved lying in the sun—the only time they were permitted outside—and she thought about how she could add more variety to their lives.

“I wanted to give my cats the outdoor experience,” she says. But she had some concerns: “Not only keeping them safe, but keeping them off my neighbor’s property and keeping the wildlife safe.”

So Rakovan’s father built a catio—a patio or screened-in porch intended for cats—onto a corner of the house. She wanted the catio for enrichment, but the time outdoors also has reduced conflict between Kobe, who can be a bully, and the other cats. (Rakovan places a small collapsible mesh cat tent on the deck to let Julius and Ginger enjoy the fresh air without running into Kobe.)

Many types of cats can benefit from an outdoor enclosure, including “door dashers, escape artists, alley cat adventurers, fighting tomcats, serial bird killers [and] wishful window watchers,” says Seattle catio designer Cynthia Chomos. And, of course, devout sun worshippers like her two-year-old orange tabby, Serena.

Using her experience as a general contractor and her background in feng shui and color design, Chomos built two enclosures: A small window box where Serena spends her afternoons and a large catio for them to enjoy together. “I wanted to keep her safe, healthy and happy and really provide her with an enriching outdoor experience,” says Chomos, who was sitting in that space with Serena one day when she decided to turn her ideas into a business called Catio Spaces.

Some people picture an unsightly wire cage attached to their house, Chomos says, but the trend’s rapid growth in the past few years has yielded more and more options according to design preferences, budget and skill.

Rakovan’s father is a handyman, so with other family members pitching in, they completed her roomy enclosure in a weekend. Creating happiness for indoor cats can be as simple as that pop-up kitty tent or a window box, or it can be as elaborate as a room with a floor, a roof and furniture for people and pets. Prices can vary quite a bit, but there’s likely something within just about everyone’s range—and a fit for most homes, be it a large house or small apartment.

Before you get started

With so many choices and things to consider, finding the right catio can be overwhelming. Ask yourself these questions before you begin.

What do you want from a catio? Do you want to enrich the lives of your indoor cats? Create a haven for feral or “personality challenged” cats who don’t get along with other feline family members? Provide a fresh-air extension of your living space for both people and cats?

What is your budget? Prices can range from under \$100 to thousands of dollars. The more you spend, in general, the more comfortable and larger the structure will be. Kits tend to be more expensive, but buying a kit may be a good option if you lack carpentry skills.

What can your home accommodate? Do you want something directly accessible from the house, through a window or a door? Or something freestanding? How much yard space can you devote to the catio?

Quick tips

- Before building your catio, get permission if needed—preferably in writing. If you are a renter, check with your landlord or management company. In some cases, you’ll need a permit from your city or homeowners association. Another good step: Make sure everyone in your home is on board with the idea.
- Cats are great climbers—and sometimes even wily diggers—so make your catio escape-proof. There should be no openings he could squeeze through, even on the top. Also avoid anything that he could catch his collar on or get stuck in.

- As much as you want to keep your cat in her catio, remember that you also want to keep other animals out. So ensure that your catio frame is strong and all components are firmly attached. If there are coyotes, bears or other large predators in your area, a catio may not be right for you, unless it's extremely sturdy.
- Pick a quiet time to finally introduce your cat to his new catio. Give him time to explore at his own pace. Catnip sprinkled on pet furniture, or treats scattered here and there, will help your cat realize that this new space is all his.

Check it twice

Follow our checklist to create the *purrfect* outdoor space for you and your cat.

- **Materials:** Choose a plan that uses wood, metal or other sturdy, nontoxic materials.
- **Floor:** Decide whether you want to build directly on grass, sand or dirt (which some cats might be tempted to use as a litter box) or construct a floor.
- **Roof:** Make sure the roof is strong enough to handle any snowfall you might get in your area.
- **Perches:** A catio is a great place to put a cat tree; some feature shelves or other scratching or climbing structures. You can also install a cat hammock, cat wheel or other fun pet furniture that you may not have room for indoors.
- **Water:** Include a bowl of fresh water (especially important on warm days).
- **Litter box:** Provide a litter box, or easy access to the inside of your house, to avoid unfortunate messes.
- **Room for you:** If you'd like to spend time in the catio, too, make sure there's a human-sized door and space for a chair, side table, lamp—whatever you want for your own comfort.
- **Protection from the elements.** Your kitty will need ventilation in warm weather and a cozy place to retreat from the cold, rain and sun.
- **Supervision:** Always supervise your cat in the catio. Build it where you can see it from your home, and consider adding lights if your cat will have nighttime access.

Easy (so simple, your cat could do it!)

If you have limited time or minimal carpentry tools and skills, you still have plenty of options for building a catio. Keep costs down by repurposing other materials with some online DIY inspiration, or go the kit route if you're willing to pay more for convenience and craft.

Advanced (get your tools ready!)

If you are creative and comfortable with tools, you are limited only by your choice of materials and the room you have. You could buy a plan to follow or create one on your own.



Dan and Julie Reeder's freestanding catio.

With some elbow grease, Jennifer Hillman built a catio for her five cats at her Seattle home. After some brainstorming, she and her sister installed a cat door into a side window, laid a patio with bricks and pavers, sunk fence posts, enclosed the top and sides with chicken wire and created a wire tunnel. They later added a ledge and a small staircase, and eventually built a second catio—replacing an old shed with a freestanding enclosure large enough for Hillman to enjoy, too. There’s even a fountain outside the space that attracts birds to enhance the kitties’ outdoor experience.

A catio is a great way to protect birds and wildlife—and be a good neighbor—while providing cats with the sunshine, fresh air, sights, sounds and stimulation that they love, says Hillman, the HSUS senior director of strategic advocacy and campaigns, who helped launch Catio Tour Seattle to inform and inspire residents. “And, it can be a great little addition to any garden or yard space, giving it a unique look.”

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