

PATCHES THE GARDEN CAT

One spring afternoon our son looked out the window overlooking the back porch of our farmhouse and found a thin, smoky gray and white kitten peering back at him and meowing. What could the boy do but take out a bowl of milk. Lapping it up quickly, the little thing meowed some more. Our son called us out to have a look at those sparkling yellowish green eyes. That pretty much sealed the deal. We took her to the vet and had her checked out.

Two hundred dollars less in my wallet, I carried her out to the car in the pet taxi that we had for our dog. From my perspective, she had to stay now because she owed us those big bucks and would have to work it off. From a cat's perspective, working it off meant just being cute. Our initial agreement called for her to be an outside cat with the right to come into the garage at night. Gradually, she became a little more daring by waiting in the bushes outside the basement door and sneaking in when we opened the door. She would fly over to the sofa, jump up, and curl up into a little ball. In

cat body language that meant, “If I’m real quiet, maybe they won’t notice me.”

As you may suspect, I had to renegotiate our contract. She became an inside cat at night and during the day when we were inside. Despite this victory, she remained a hard worker when she was outside during the day. She performed all the chores established by the feline code of ethics, including hunting mice and moles, chasing squirrels, and scattering butterflies. To my surprise, though, she showed an extraordinary interest in what I did in the garden. She sat and watched with an inquisitive look and occasionally came over to inspect my work.

Now cats are a different cog in the gardening wheel of life. Dogs joyfully get into the dirty work. Cats, on the other hand, ... I’m reminded of the sign that I saw at the vet’s office— “Dogs have masters. Cats have staff.” Patches became perfectly content to let Ruff the gardening dog handle the heavy work such as digging, weeding, and irrigation. She leaned toward the less physical side of management that required more finesse.

One of the earliest chores that she took to consisted of tree bark testing for strength and consistency of thickness. If on her way up the tree, her

claws could penetrate to the designated depth and support her weight (the formula calculated and established by cat scientists in some previous century), then she gave the tree a healthy rating. If, on the other hand, any bark flaked off or her claws penetrated too deeply, then the tree obviously lacked the required nutrients to produce a healthy bark layer. I believe she once referred to that lack of proper nutrients as a meownesium deficiency. As any serious scientist knows, though, there is always a certain risk involved with these types of tests. The one issue that she would run into with a meownesium deficiency is that of bark caramewowcraty. I know that sounds like some kind of scientific jargon, but the bottom line is that with bark caramewowcraty what goes up doesn't always come down. A ladder is a handy tool to have on hand during this type of test.

Every healthy garden should support a multitude of different species, some beneficial to its growth and others not so much. One such 'not so much' species belongs in the Talpidae family and is more commonly called the mole. I have given Patches free rein in handling this particular issue and it seems to have meshed nicely with her feline abilities. One fall afternoon she brought in a John

Doe mole for questioning. Some may question the harshness of her interrogation methods, but as far as I am concerned, it is her call. When this particular John Doe did not answer truthfully, she would bat him upside his head. Eventually, she seemed satisfied with his answers. When she felt it had reached the point where her questions were no longer producing any more high-quality intel, she released the subject. Apparently, the mole heeded her warnings to stay out of her garden, because I haven't had a mole problem for at least a year.

Almost everyone has a fondness for butterflies. Just the other day, when I turned the page on my *Family Circus* daily calendar, I saw Dolly watch a butterfly fly away and say, "I wish butterflies liked to land on us like mosquitos and flies do." Their beauty and gentleness are fascinating, indeed. There is a stage in the life of butterflies, though, that must be considered when trying to balance beauty and damage in the garden. Since the balancing point is often relative and hard to quantify for us humans, I have left the job of butterfly crowd dispersal agent to Patches and her innate feline discretion. This, of course, relieves me of a great deal of stress. Her approach to the role is really rather base and intuitive. When she feels the

number of butterflies present has exceeded proper balance parameters, she pounces out from her observation point under the foliage and the butterflies react by scattering from the garden. She then returns to another observation point to do further surveillance.

One area that Patches took on herself without any encouragement or training involved the physical fitness of another fellow garden resident, namely the lizard. Perhaps you've never given this much thought, but she believes that a physically fit lizard is much more efficient at keeping bugs under control. Furthermore, a lizard whose legs are strong and whose lungs are healthy stands a better chance of eluding predators. So, with such a noble cause to motivate her, she embarks on a strenuous workout regimen with each lizard that seeks residence in her garden. Every morning she chases them through the obstacle course of foliage, pots, and sprinkler heads, building coordination and endurance in her subjects. I know, some of you might think that's just what cats like to do, but I would argue that she'd much rather be curled up on a nice pillow instead of engaging in such grueling exertions. For those sluggards who fail to push themselves adequately in the pursuit of fitness, she picks

them up with her mouth, carries them back to where they started, and makes them begin all over again. I'm sure there are some in the lizard community who consider her a hard master, but I would say it is better to be living free and healthy than to be a tasty meal for a snake or an egret. Cold hard math supports this conclusion as the lizard community is growing by leaps and bounds, literally and figuratively.

Still another time, Patches revealed a scientific side that I had not seen before. My wife found her inside the screened-in porch over against the rail chewing on a leaf of one of her prized orchids. As she was about to scold the creature, I stepped in and prevented an unjust accusation. In examining the leaf, I posed a question. What if what she is doing is actually a controlled experiment to create a mutation process that would eventually yield an orchid with serrated leaf margins? My wife looked at me in disbelief. Perhaps it was simply a lack of discernment on her part in not recognizing the potential botanical breakthrough involved, but I wisely gathered Patches up in my arms and removed her from the scene.

As resourceful and diligent as Patches is in doing all of her work, she continues to amaze me

with her time management. In fact, I am actually quite envious of her success in that area. Somehow, with everything she does, she still manages three, four, or more guilt-free naps during the day.