



Cleo's Picks Of The Litter Box

I guess you could say I've seen my fair share of litter box configurations--I'm no spring kitten--but I'd never heard of some of these "green" litters before I started my research.

Avoid These Environmentally- Or Kitty-Unfriendly Litters:

CLAY LITTER

Clay-based silica kitty litter is strip-mined, causing extreme environmental damage during extraction. And the dust it kicks up is bad for kitty lungs and can cause asthma and respiratory disease. I have used this stuff before but I'm glad I don't anymore!

CLUMPING LITTER

There's a lot of controversy over whether or not clumping litter can get stuck in kitty lungs or intestines. Regardless of the health effects, sodium bentonite is mined just like clay, so I'm keeping it in the "avoid" list.

PINE AND CEDAR SHAVINGS

Pine and cedar shavings smell heavenly in a horse stall, but cats can develop allergies to the phenols found in these soft woods. My research suggests that not all cats are bothered by it, but I've run into enough information that would definitely make me think twice.

SCENTED LITTER

The fragrances in scented kitty litter come from undisclosed combinations of chemicals, including hormone-disrupting phthalates. Besides being mysterious and unnecessary, they can trigger allergies in pets and humans alike. Sneezing's no fun when you're trying to do your business.

SAND

Sand could be okay if you promised to reuse it, but I'm going to put it in the "avoid" column because it's a scarce resource. I didn't know this until I started my research, but apparently the construction and mining industries go through a lot of sand, either eroding dunes, destroying beaches, or wiping out fish and coral from murky water caused by dredging. I don't know about you, but my litter box just isn't that important.

FLUSHABLE LITTERS

These are good because it helps biodegrade the litter, but the whole cat-poo-in-water thing is complicated, thanks to a parasite that can hurt sea otters. See below under "Waste disposal options" for the nitty-gritty details.

SELF-CLEANING LITTER BOXES

My only complaint with this is the obvious: do you really need to waste electricity to clean a litter box? I know, I know--if I think it's so ridiculous, maybe I should clean my own litter box. I get it. But I have naps to take, and sunny spots on the floor to keep warm! There's no time for cleaning!

SILICA GEL LITTERS

It's really good at absorbing liquid and controlling odor, but it's expensive, and the kinds with blue granules might be dyed with cobalt(II) chloride--a toxic and possibly carcinogenic moisture indicator. If you're a furry crusader with blue silica gel litter in your box, it might be worth a call to the manufacturer to see what chemicals they use.

Greener, Healthier Litter Picks:

RECYCLED NEWSPAPER

Recycled materials are always best for litter because this is an end-of-the-line kind of job. You can buy newspaper litter almost anywhere nowadays, but if you'd like an option that includes less ink (and costs almost nothing), you can make your own. I herewith present you with Allie's newspaper litter recipe, which sounds like a great afternoon craft project for lil' two-leggeds, too:

Shred newspaper in a paper shredder and collect it in an unused litter box.

Soak the paper in warm water mixed with a few squirts gentle, biodegradable dish soap. The shredded paper takes on a cooked oatmeal consistency. The paper won't come completely clean, but the water will turn grey.

Drain the water (an old colander works wonders) and repeat the soaking process minus the soap.

Sprinkle baking soda liberally on the wet paper. Knead it in to the mixture (you might want to wear gloves to avoid getting ink on your hands).

Squeeze the remaining moisture out until it's as dry as you can get it.

Crumble over a screen and leave to dry for a few days.

Once it's dry, put about an inch and a half to two inches of the paper crumbles in the litter box. Scoop solids daily and change it once a week. It takes about a half an hour to 45 minutes to make a 2-3 week supply of litter.

SIFTING BOXES

This is an interesting idea that might be a little time-intensive but it's probably the best thing for the environment: a sifting screen with gravel or other safe, washable litter on top to catch the poo, and a box under it to catch the wet stuff. If you go this route, I'd suggest getting untreated, pea-sized gravel (that is, not plastic, and not painted fish tank gravel) and wash the dust off before you add it to the box.

WHEAT, CORN, GROUND CORN COBS, ALFALFA PELLETS, AND WHEAT
Nontoxic and renewable, check! Just don't eat 'em.

WOOD STOVE FUEL AND SAWDUST PELLETS

These pellets are cheap, readily available, and should be nontoxic since the oils are removed during processing, unlike shavings. You want to look for the kind that are unscented, don't have any additives, and are made from scrapped lumber rather than coming straight from the forest.

UNSCENTED LITTERS

If you have the option between the same kind of litter in an unscented and scented version, always go with the unscented.

Waste Disposal Options

Some cat poo carries a parasite called toxoplasmosis (the technical term is *Toxoplasma gondii*, which can cause birth defects in developing human babies (pregnant humans, step away from the litter box!) and has been linked to the death of sea otters off the California coast. So the problem with flushing cat poo is that waste treatment plants can't get the toxoplasmosis out, and then it goes into waterways--where it hurts the sea otters.

Due to popular demand: UPDATE ON TOXOPLASMOSIS!

Toxoplasmosis *gondii* could be a problem for some cats, but not all cats. Felines get toxoplasmosis from eating rodents and infected raw meat and other things from the outdoors that maybe an indoor cat would not encounter. So if you've rescued a shelter cat without knowing his or her previous history, there's a chance he or she may be infected. And mommy cats can pass on toxoplasmosis to their kittens as well. If you have any doubts, and want to know for sure, you can have your kitty's blood tested for it.

And toxoplasmosis *gondii* is not so scary as it sounds--at least for cats. Most cats will never get sick from it, but cats with feline leukemia virus (FELV) or feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) are more vulnerable and may get ill. (Symptoms are fever, not being hungry, and feeling tired. If it attacks the nervous system, you'd see more pronounced symptoms like incoordination and personality changes.) But again, this will not happen in most cats, and if you have questions, you should contact your friendly neighborhood veterinarian.

NOT PRETTY, BUT SAFEST FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED: Trash

You know where this goes: straight to the landfill. Not me and Eddie's first pick under normal circumstances, but at least with a landfill the parasites will stay put.

RISKY: Toilet

If you're living in a land-locked state--let's say Utah--you're less likely to make sea otters sick. But toxoplasmosis can hurt developing human babies and humans with impaired immune systems, so it could still pose a risk to two-legged friends. And while not all cats have toxoplasmosis (see above), I still err on the side of caution--I am a cat, after all, not a sniff-now-ask-questions-later dog.

RISKY: Burying

Out of sight, out of mind? Actually, no. Burying the poop could contaminate the surrounding area and groundwater and won't kill parasites for up to a year, making your backyard a small-scale landfill.

EXPERTS ONLY: Composting or underground pet waste digester

Composting is way cool when it comes to veggies and table scraps, but the toxoplasmosis parasite in cat poo is hard to eliminate by composting--not to mention roundworms and other parasites that need a hot compost or worm box to break down. Beware, weekend garden hobbyists! And even once it's composted, I wouldn't recommend that you sprinkle it around your prize tomatoes, or heaven forbid, organic catnip.

Litter Box Liners

Technically, you really don't have to use a liner if you keep two boxes on hand and can rinse out one while the other gets put into service. But if you must use a liner, use recycled plastic.

How To Clean A Litter Box

Hot water, white vinegar, and a good scrub should do the trick. Avoid bleach if you can--it's hard on the environment.

How To Make The Switch To A New Litter

Like these ideas? Don't switch all of a sudden! The change can be disruptive to us cats' fine sense of routine and may result in eliminations in, um, less than ideal areas. Like the couch. Instead of switching up all at once, mix in a few handfuls of the new stuff and give it a few days. Then the next time you clean the litter box, swap in half of the new for half of the old. Await the verdict and if all is well, try a full box of the new material the next time you replenish the litter.

I bet you never thought you'd spend so much time thinking about something as simple as a litter box. Me neither--but it's pretty important to us cats, and as it turns out, the environment!