

# Help! My pet cat is becoming a nip-head

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I cannot grow large plants of catnip (*Nepeta cataria*) in my garden. As soon as I put out a plant, it is immediately rolled upon and otherwise assaulted into a broken, dried mat within a week. I know that I am attracting not only our two cats but several neighborhood cats for a drug-induced bacchanal.

Scientific research into the "catnip response" shows that it is under genetic control, inherited as a dominant autosomal gene, i.e., not all cats respond and it is not linked to the sex of the cat. The strength of the response is also under social-control, and relaxed cats will be more receptive.

The sequence of the response, however, is invariable: (1) sniffing, (2) licking and chewing with head shaking, (3) chin and cheek rubbing, and (4) head-over rolling and body rubbing. Additional responses may include salivating, digging or pawing, scratching, and washing or grooming.

Almost all members of the cat family (*Felidae*) respond, including the big cats (yes, even lions!), but cheetahs show no response. Of the related animal families, the viverrids (mongoose, etc.) and canids (dogs) are all indifferent to catnip.

If you really, really love your cat and are a gardener, then there are a number of additional plants that also induce the catnip response. Many other *Nepeta* species, sometimes called catmints, also have the active compounds, and "Walker's Low" is one of the most decorative in the garden (if your cat can manage to leave it alone).

The garden valerian or garden heliotrope (*Valeriana officinalis*) has stinky roots that are often sold as a sedative tea, but for cats, it is like crack cocaine; I've seen our cats actually dig the roots out of snow-buried plants. The Mediterranean cat-thyme (*Teucrium marum*) is very redolent of many of the active components and a real "super-catnip."

We don't really know why cats respond to catnip, but all the components of the catnip response are displacement activities of eating or sexual behavior in the cat. Interestingly, though, there are many insects that use the same active principles as defensive secretions. For example, the *Dolichoderine* ants (which include the cosmopolitan Argentine ant, *Iridomyrmex humilis*) have many of the same compounds found in plants that induce the catnip response. So, if you observe your cat eating ants, he may just be trying to get a catnip fix, not helping you solve your ant problem.

Oh, and one last note: if you want a natural mosquito repellent that is even better than DEET, the active principle in most commercial repellents, then catnip is your choice. If you cannot find natural repellents with catnip oil, then merely rub the leaves onto your clothing and shoes ... but then



Submitted photo

**Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*) can be hard to grow if you have a pet feline around.**

## Garden Tales

warning! the nearby kitties may react to you (and, please don't do this if you plan to go on an African safari).

*On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium. If you would like to receive a scientific article on catnip and the catnip response that Dr. Tucker co-authored, e-mail him at [aucker@desu.edu](mailto:aucker@desu.edu) with a complete mailing address (sorry, phone calls will not be taken) or mail a written request to him at the Dept. of Agriculture & Natural Resources, Delaware State University, 1200 N. Dupont Highway, Dover, DE 19901-2277.*