

The Purrfect Salad

My tabby's ears twitch when the refrigerator door creaks. In the time to grab two vine-ripened tomatoes and a crisp head of lettuce, my furry gray companion, Twilight, leaps onto the ledge above the kitchen counter. She seats herself as if in a prized theater box. From this vantage point, Twilight watches me like a celebrity chef. Together we begin our evening salad-making ritual.

Tempting Tomatoes

I start by chopping tomatoes and onions while Twilight focuses on the smorgasbord spread before her. The familiar phrase, *curiosity killed the cat*, reminds me to watch her carefully and not give in when she begs.

Contrary to popular belief, domesticated animals will not always shun foods harmful to their health. Many fruits and vegetables beneficial to humans are lethal to felines. Tomatoes, even minute amounts, can cause severe gastrointestinal upset.

A chemical in onions, n-propyl disulfide, breaks down red blood cells and prevents these cells from carrying oxygen. A few gulps of chopped onions could cause blood in the urine, rapid breathing, and an increased heart rate - serious threats to a pet.

Mixed Message Mushrooms

Mushrooms, the next ingredient, can send a mixed message. The store-bought variety is safe. But if your cat ventures out-of-doors, he will not distinguish between deadly garden fungi and the harmless flesh of the white mushroom.

Dr. Bari L. Spielman of The American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine says there is no specific test for mushroom poisoning. Inducing vomit may bring up the offending item, and that alone may be tested. If you suspect your cat has eaten a poisonous mushroom and is vomiting, has diarrhea, or other signs of distress, contact your veterinarian.

Healthy Veggies

Twilight gets a whiff of a new vegetable. She sits up, eyes dilated. I reward her patience with one thin slice of cucumber, chopped into bite-sized pieces and piled in her bowl. Cucumbers high water content and fiber will help cats guard against constipation. Twilight savors her snack while I work on the ‘people salad’.

I grate a carrot. Twilight presents ears-forward curiosity. Maybe it’s the bright orange color or the light sweet scent. I offer a few shavings. She sniffs each strip then lies on her side, head resting against her bowl. Cats are carnivores and must get their vitamin A, along with other essential nutrients, from meat sources. Unlike us, cat’s bodies cannot convert beta-carotene into usable vitamin A.

Twilight’s eyes rest on the lettuce, the pièce de résistance. I take the romaine from its plastic bag and run it under water. It’s been said, ‘cats rule and dogs drool’ but Twilight is drooling, a normal response to the sight or smell of food in most animals.

Years ago, when Twilight first showed an interest in lettuce, I thought she was unique. But Twilight’s veterinarian told me if an indoor cat has no houseplants to sample, lettuce is the closest thing your pet has to the outdoors. Outdoor cats daily graze on grass and interesting weeds. Grass aids in digestion and is a natural medicine.

Lettuce, although containing little nutritional value for an animal, will not hurt your cat, and may ease the craving for grass. The cellulose carbohydrates in all lettuce varieties act as bulk fiber. This promotes normal fecal elimination by absorbing water into the intestines while ridding impurities in the stomach. Twilight grabs the thin slivers of lettuce with her rough tongue.

As I watch her eat, I think of my friend and her fur-children, Thor and Lucy. Thor, the male cat, licks his lettuce from the cool tile floor. The female, Lucy, demands her greens served on a napkin. They have distinct personalities, but both indoor cats share a love for lettuce. Although vegetables may be a welcomed addition, cats cannot live on a vegetarian diet. The emphasis must be on protein.

Edible Extras

When I slice hard-boiled eggs, Twilight, depending on her mood, may or may not be interested. Eggs are safe for cats and a good source of protein that provides a shine to their coats. About one teaspoon of fat a day will support general good health, a glossy coat, and prevent hairballs and bladder stones. I rely on Twilight's nutrient-packed cat food to provide the protein and vitamins her body requires.

Next, I grate cheese. Twilight likes cheddar, but also fancies Swiss. A teaspoonful may be a special treat for your pet. Although aged, mold should never be on cheese or on any food you offer your cat. Tremorgens, a toxic by-product of some mold, interferes with normal nervous system functions. If you wouldn't eat the spoiled cheese sandwich found under your bed, you should not offer it to your furry friend. Remember, Tom or Fifi or Sweetums, are not garbage disposals.

Family and Feline Mealtime

People feed a buffet of bad foods to their pets, and some cats thrive on an oddball diet. However, this is no excuse to feed your cat inedible leftovers.

Should your cat dine before or during your mealtime? When I feed Twilight during the preparation phase, she is not as likely to beg at the table when many unsafe foods tempt her.

After her salad, sans dressing, Twilight leaves content, tail up. She rubs her satisfied belly against my leg.

The time we spend together preparing the purrfect salad is as important as the meal itself.

~ Honorable Mention—Writer's Editors Network