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Recession-proof cat toys

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For The Associated Press

(AP) - Brother, can you spare a twisty-tie?

Hard economic times can mean fewer holiday gifts _ for your pets, too. Fortunately, cats were into recycling and repurposing long before "green" became the latest buzzword.

If you've ever seen your cat walk past a nice stuffed mouse to bat around one of those wire twisty-ties that close a loaf of bread, why not take the hint? Here's what your feline family really wants you to do for the holidays:

_ Get milk! Or juice, as long as it's in a plastic jug. Those little caps make great toys, especially the kind with the tear-off plastic strip.

_ Drink wine to relax. If watching your portfolio crash means you're going through more wine these days, you've also got more corks for your cat to bat around.

_ Wear your wristwatch, even if you can't afford new batteries. On a sunny day, you can get the sun to reflect off it and make a spot of light that your cat will chase around the floor and walls _ just like a laser pointer, but totally free.

_ Let your hair grow long. You'll save money on haircuts, and once it's long enough for a ponytail, you can share your hair ribbons. Cassandra Zaruba of Westminster, Md., has a cat that loves a particular kind of hair ribbon.

"I keep them in a Rubbermaid box, and a sure way to lure her out of any hiding place is to pop the lid of that box," she says.

(Don't do this with rubber bands, which some cats might be tempted to eat.)

_ Buy presents for other people. Not because your cat is so generous, but because your cat will enjoy trying to help wrap presents. Tear off a piece of the wrapping paper and crunch it up on ball for her to chase around. When you run out, try aluminum foil or candy wrappers.

_ Shop by mail. Online or catalog, it doesn't matter what you buy as long as it's delivered in a box. Leave the empty shipping carton on the floor or a table, and cats are sucked in as if by a magical force.

_ But shop local, too. Your cat doesn't give a fig about keeping independent neighborhood shops in business, but you'll bring things home in paper bags that are great for hiding in and make that irresistible crinkly noise.

It's OK if you have to cut back on the shopping, because you only need a few of those boxes and bags. "What I've discovered is that if you move them to a different location, the cats think they're brand new and will start playing with them again," says Karen Duvall of Bend, OR.

Don't forget that many activities that you think are chores are really cat games: You want to tie your shoes; your cat will want to bat the shoelaces. You want to change the sheets on your bed; you cat will want to play hide and seek.

Speaking of beds, there is also no need to buy a special kitty bed.

Cats love to lie on things on top of other things, no matter their texture or height: lying on a shirt

that's on the bed is better than lying on any other spot on the bed, even if they're made of nearly identical fabric. A magazine on a table, even a piece of paper on the floor_ if it's flat enough to lie on and it's on top of something else, it's a free cat bed.

Kyle McCowin of Arlington ,Va., has noticed this phenomenon, and wondered, is there such a thing as too much "on-topness"?

"Like is a magazine on a newspaper on a shirt on the bed better than just a shirt on the bed, or is that too many layers?" says McCowin. "These are the questions that keep me up at night."

And if other worries are keeping you up at night, you can both make use of another arrangement that pleases cats: read. Your cat loves to get in the way of a good read.

When your cat sits on the newspaper, don't push him away. He'll be happy at no cost - and maybe skipping that bad economic news will be good for your mood too.

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