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Plants vs. Animals

Ellen C. Wells



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In preparing this month's cover story on houseplants, I noted to myself how interesting it was that three of the six folks I interviewed attributed the rise in houseplants among younger folks to their not having—for various and sundry reasons—pets in their lives. Mom and Dad don't want another four-legged child, landlords are wary of potential damage, roommates are allergic, the rental life is a transient one, etcetera. So I guess we can say thank you to dog-averse property-owners, sneezy roomies and “not-outta-my-pocket” parents for the increase in household interiorscaping. Given the shrinking possibilities of furry friendship, plants become the pets.

My Dad, being a true farmer, didn't see the value in raising something you couldn't eat—whether it was a plant or an animal, although barn cats did have their place. I learned an early farm-child lesson when I “lost” my pet

duck Grover, later to be found as an all-dark meat “chicken” on my dinner plate. But in the home Mom had her way, and she had her pets, both furry and foliar—African violets, chenille plants, lipstick plants, orange tabbies, brown tortoiseshells, an odd-ball Siamese. A good 15 years after the last child left the house (that would be me) she brought in fancier friends such as orchids and pure-bred Ragdoll cats.

I'm thinking back on all the plant-pet relationships I've had in my life. For instance, there was Jingles, my childhood indoor-outdoor tabby who learned to ring the doorbell to come inside, which he would do at 3:00 a.m., and the purple African violet that lived eight years, and once bloomed for one year straight.

Currently I am befriended by Boo (aka Boober), the black cat who is such a love; Bandit (aka Bandy Man), the scaredy cat who gives me love bites on the back of my arms at 3:00 a.m.; and Osa (aka Osa Mimosa), the Costa Rican beagle-rat terrier rescue who taught me the most important lesson in life, which is to love dogs and to let dogs love me. Plant-wise, I have surprisingly few. There's a spathiphyllum that somehow survives despite Bandy's munching, a miniature African violet and a miniature orchid I'm pretending isn't dead. There's also a hoya that I've had for gosh-near 20 years that has never bloomed (the good news is it isn't dead). But the granddaddy of them all is a gorgeous peach-colored Christmas cactus my mother gave me in 1991. The monstrous plant, which endures the indignity of Christmas ornaments and lights, is one of the longest and steadiest relationships I've ever had.

Having both plant pets and animal pets, here's a quick list of some pros and cons I've noted for both:

- Plants don't poop, but sometimes they do leak out of the bottom of the pot.

- Plants can't tell you they need some attention until it's nearly too late.
- Plants can handle being knocked off a windowsill. But so can cats.
- Plants don't mind the vacuum cleaner.
- Animals need feeding, like every day.
- Animal dental visits are waaaaay expensive. Not so for plants.
- Animals can cuddle, and even know when you need it.
- Animals are fun to watch and play with. Plants, not so much.
- Plants make oxygen. Animals use it.

But most importantly, both animal and plant pets give humans an opportunity to care for something selflessly. We don't expect much in return, except maybe some cat and dog cuddles of appreciation. And unless you have a pet giant tortoise, you bring these creatures into your life knowing you'll likely see them pass away and experience true heartbreak. But you feed and clean up and repot and care and give love anyway. It's funny how plants and animals allow humans to show themselves acting their most human. And I consider myself all that much more fulfilled for having them in my life. **GP**