



Pittwater Animal Hospital

We are your pet's other best friend.

FACT SHEET

Which Pets Best Suit the Elderly

Despite some recent reports to the contrary, we have seen evidence aplenty that pets can significantly improve the quality of life for elderly people. The fact that many units, retirement villages or hospices discourage pets seems to us counter-productive. Happily, some will make allowances in the case of small and easily managed animals. A few nursing homes even keep a dog as a kind of mascot to be enjoyed by all residents.

Small dogs

Although dogs are probably the most problematic pets for older people living in restrictive conditions, smaller lap dogs such as fox terriers, chihuahuas or poodles can adapt well to living inside. Even so, they still should have exercise several times a day and a place to do their business.

If having a dog would prove too impractical in your situation, please read on.

Cats

Cats with sedate natures, such as rag dolls and Persians, tend to be quite happy living in a house or unit. Clean by nature, cats usually adapt readily to litter trays. Speaking of which, it's probably not a bad idea to get one with a hood to help reduce odour.

Because cats are playful by nature, they should be provided with a variety of distractions, namely a scratching post, specially designed toys (including a Kong Ball) and objects for it to climb and hide behind. For both your sakes, you should play with your cat as often as possible.

Birds

Lots of older people derive great pleasure from feathered friends. Canaries, cockatiels, love birds, budgies and other small parrots make wonderful, responsive companions. Budgies and cockatiels can also become surprisingly good talkers with a little encouragement.

Aside from canaries, most pet birds will enjoy a chance to stretch their wings and fly about your place. Of course, it makes good sense to train your bird to ride your finger first so you can return it to the cage. Also, always make sure doors and windows are closed and the stove is off before letting out your bird.

Aquarium fish

Fish tanks are becoming more popular all the time. Watching fish gracefully glide back and forth is much more rewarding and pacifying than watching the box, and there aren't any commercials either.

When purchasing the filters and other necessary equipment, stay away from the bargain-priced items. Creating the fish's environment – placing the rocks and plants and so forth - can be a bit of fun. Once established with a stabilised water environment, tropical aquariums are easy to maintain and not particularly expensive.

We should point out that although marine fish tend to be far more colourful and exotic looking than most of their freshwater brethren, marine tanks are a good deal more demanding when it comes to maintenance. And some of the fish can get pretty pricey.

Mice and rats

Probably the hardest part about keeping mice and rats is convincing your nursing home to let you. Aside from that, they can be excellent pets for older people. They're cheap to buy and easy to keep. Their housing is also inexpensive and takes up very little room. Two cautionary notes: you must keep a rat's enclosure clean, otherwise it will smell. And they must not be housed in a room where people sleep; doing so could promote allergic reactions.

Native fauna

There is a great way to enjoy many of the benefits of a pet without most of the accompanying responsibilities – such as walking them, cleaning up after them and making sure they get their shots. Attract native animals.

Not surprisingly, the best way to attract native birds is by planting native trees and shrubs. Eucalypts and acacias appeal to all sorts of locals. If you're after nectar feeders, you should plant grevilleas, kangaroo paws, banksias, callistemons and hakeas to encourage them. Tea trees and melaleucas attract insect eaters. And casuarinas, native conifers and ornamental grasses will bring in the seed eaters.

Installing a bird bath and establishing a feeding table will also attract birds. Put out some soaked dry dog food mixed with hard-boiled eggs and cheese and you should expect to see kookaburras and magpies. To make them especially appreciative you might try leaving out minced steak or finely cut pieces of red meat; just be sure to add some calcium carbonate powder. That said, it's not a good idea to overdo feeding native birds. They still must be able to look after themselves to at least balance their diets.

Then there are possums. All it takes to create a 'possum palace' is a suitable-sized box placed in a tree near your flat or unit. You can feed them small quantities of bread and jam, fruitcake and soft, ripe fruit. But again, not enough that they stop fending for themselves.

Lizards also make attractive guests, especially the ones that eat snails. Many will be more than happy with a few hollow logs or terracotta pipes lined with dry grass. To bring them around, try leaving out sweet, juicy fruits and hard-boiled egg, but in limited quantities.

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