

Pampered pets

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Pet ownership is at an all-time high. Sixty-two percent of U.S. households own a pet -- some 72.9 million homes, according to the 2011-12 annual survey by the American Pet Products Association. And we're giving to our animals like never before.

In 2010, dog owners increased spending on their pooches more than 30 percent, and dogs and cats are among the small pets that are most likely to get gifts at Christmas time, according to the APPA survey. Nine percent of dog owners say they've held a holiday or birthday party for their dog, and 4 percent say they've done so for their cat. Pet owners' emotional ties with dogs and cats run deep.

"A lot of baby boomers become empty nesters and still have that nurturing need," said Kristen Levine, founder of Tarpon Springs, Fla.-based Fetching Communications, a marketer serving the pet industry. "A lot of millennials get pets before starting a family to fulfill that same need."

While most pet owners won't hesitate to purchase a little something special for their pets this holiday season, the boom in products at retail means there's more to choose from. Think before you shop, said Lorrie Shaw of Michigan, a pet owner and blogger for annarbor.com. "Pay attention to what your pet likes to do. Does he run and play, or is he more cognitive?"

GOING GREEN

Natural, nontoxic, sustainable, recycled and locally produced products are hot for pets.

Brentwood, Tenn.-based **Earth Dog** offers hemp dog collars, leashes, beds and toys, all made in the U.S. The Leaf green adjustable hemp collar has quick-release hardware (\$18 to \$20, specialty stores). Dog and cat beds made of soy-based material and recycled content are widely available. Many suppliers offer organic catnip. The **Purr Highness** cat scratcher from Worldwide is made of recycled corrugated cardboard and doubles as a lounger (\$20, specialty stores). **Doggles Plush Bottle Toys** come in the shape of animals and have two squeakers. Stuff a used plastic water bottle inside and the toy provides instant crinkly chewing fun. (\$13 and up, specialty stores).

THINKING TOYS

Products that appeal to an animal's intuitive side, engaging them and encouraging natural activity, also are trendy. "Foraging toys are hot," said Levine. They give owners a chance to do other things while their pet is occupied, she said. Shaw suggests the treat-dispensing **Busy Buddy Kibble Nibble** by Premier Pet (two sizes, \$10 to \$20, specialty stores). This activity ball stimulates pups mentally and physically by making them work for their food. Levine is a fan of the **Physipet**, a line of exercise and entertainment products for cats and dogs. The toys react to the pet, pulling back when the pet pulls, incorporating exercise with play and reducing boredom and separation anxiety, said company founder and inventor Jude Waddy (\$70 and up, physipet.com).

Interactive games from the Swedish company **Nina Ottosson** are designed to stimulate a dog's brain and reinforce people-friendly behavior. "Puzzle toys provide the mental stimulation many dogs lack in their everyday life," said owner Nina Ottosson. Fill the new treat Maze and a pet will happily work away to "solve" the puzzle and get the treat. There are versions for cats and dogs (starting at \$15, specialty stores.)

ROAD WARRIORS

"More people travel with their pets nowadays," said Levine. She stressed the importance of pet restraint while driving. "Just like texting and driving, a loose pet in the vehicle can be dangerous," she said. **Kurgo** makes a variety of pet-carrying products. A **Skybox Booster** seat for puppies and small dogs up to 30 pounds lifts them up to provide them with a window view (\$60, specialty stores); the **Kurgo Auto Zip-Line** tethers a dog safely, with a harness attached to a zip-line that runs between any two fixed points in the vehicle and allows a dog to walk back and forth, sit and stand (\$38, specialty stores). Car carriers are especially important for cats, who often are not fond of travel. Levine suggests that animal lovers bring water for their pets during trips. **Pawgua** makes a portable, BPA-free plastic dog bowl for thirsty, out-and-about pups (\$15, specialty stores). The bowl keeps water cool and the top twists off.

The best gift for a pet is simple and free: Stop, drop and play. "The best thing is for you to interact with your pets," said Shaw. "It helps them hang on to their cognitive skills and reinforces that connection owners are seeking when they get pets in the first place."