



PURR-FECT PET SITTERS

Make Sure Your Pet Enjoys
Your Vacation, Too.

by Sandra Murphy

Vacations bring rest and less stress, a change of pace and for some, a break from caring for the family pet, made possible by a growing number of professional pet sitters.

"I have more peace of mind with a pet sitter rather than a friend. Even if they've already had a long day, sitters still properly take care of the pets," says Christina Pierce, a federal examiner of financial institutions for consumer protection in Little Rock, Arkansas. "Many professional pet sitters are trained to respond to potential health and other issues. Especially with small animals, early recognition of a problem is key."

Pierce used to have chinchillas, and now has a cat she rescued and relocated from Dallas, Texas, plus two adopted former foster rabbits.

"A sitter may be excellent, but not know your breed," advises Rae Bailey, a retiree in Georgetown, Texas, who regularly uses sitters for her Scottie when she travels. "Don't be afraid to ask questions." She notes that dogs are particularly good judges of character, so if one doesn't like the sitter, simply try another.

Pet sitting services use a contract to outline rates, what the sitter will do, the number and duration of daily visits, start and end dates and how the house key is returned when the job is complete. Regular clients may have the sitter keep the key handy.

Professional sitters are bonded, insured and background-checked, have experience with a variety of species and breeds, are fairly flexible and love animals. A pre-visit will introduce pets and sitter to each other and address any relationship concerns and individual needs, such as medications.

"I had a diabetic Westie, a big consideration," says

Diane Meadows, a retired paralegal in San Antonio, Texas. "It was huge for me to hand over the keys and my trust, but our sitter was dependable and knowledgeable." During one visit, her sitter also alerted Meadows to a possible propane gas leak.

At the outset, have the sitter meet all the family pets to ensure mutual comfort. Show the sitter where the leash, toys, treats, food and water dishes are kept, supplies for cleanups, the family vet's location, hours, office and emergency phone numbers and instructions for any security alarm system. Codes can be personalized and deactivated when no longer needed. Sometimes clients request extra services such as collecting the mail and newspapers, watering indoor plants and leaving lights on.

Both young and older dogs need three visits a day to avoid household accidents. Cats are usually fine with one. "Cats like to be pampered. A friendly sitter provides the care she's used to, in familiar surroundings," says Anne Moss, whose educational website *TheCatSite.com* originates near Tel Aviv, Israel. "Kitty's more relaxed and receives a higher level of care than at a boarding facility," she notes.

A pet sitting service offers the added benefit of backups in case the assigned sitter is sick or delayed. In Huntley, Illinois, Diane Muchow, an adjunct instructor at Computer Systems Institute, explains why she prefers a pet sitting service for her black Labrador mix. "Our first sitter was a one-woman business. One day, she forgot to crate the dogs when she left, and we came home to find the evidence of an accident on our new carpet throughout the house," Muchow says. "We switched to a professional service."

She sees the primary advantage of professional help as dependability and flexibility. "The service has a website to order the shifts we need, which are confirmed by email," she notes. "It's handy when my husband travels and I work."

A kennel isn't for all dogs, says Scott Mell, an area manager for JoAnn Fabrics in Affton, Missouri. He recalls his Bernese mountain dog's first and only trip to the local kennel. Upon arrival, she climbed on top of the car rather than go inside. "She was adamant," he says. "I hired a sitter the next day. She loved her sitter's visits."

Whether pets need special attention, daily walks, a mid-day backyard break or multiple visits while the family vacations, a pet sitter can provide excellent care. Many owners like to receive daily text message updates and may even e-retrieve bonus selfies of their happy pets from home.

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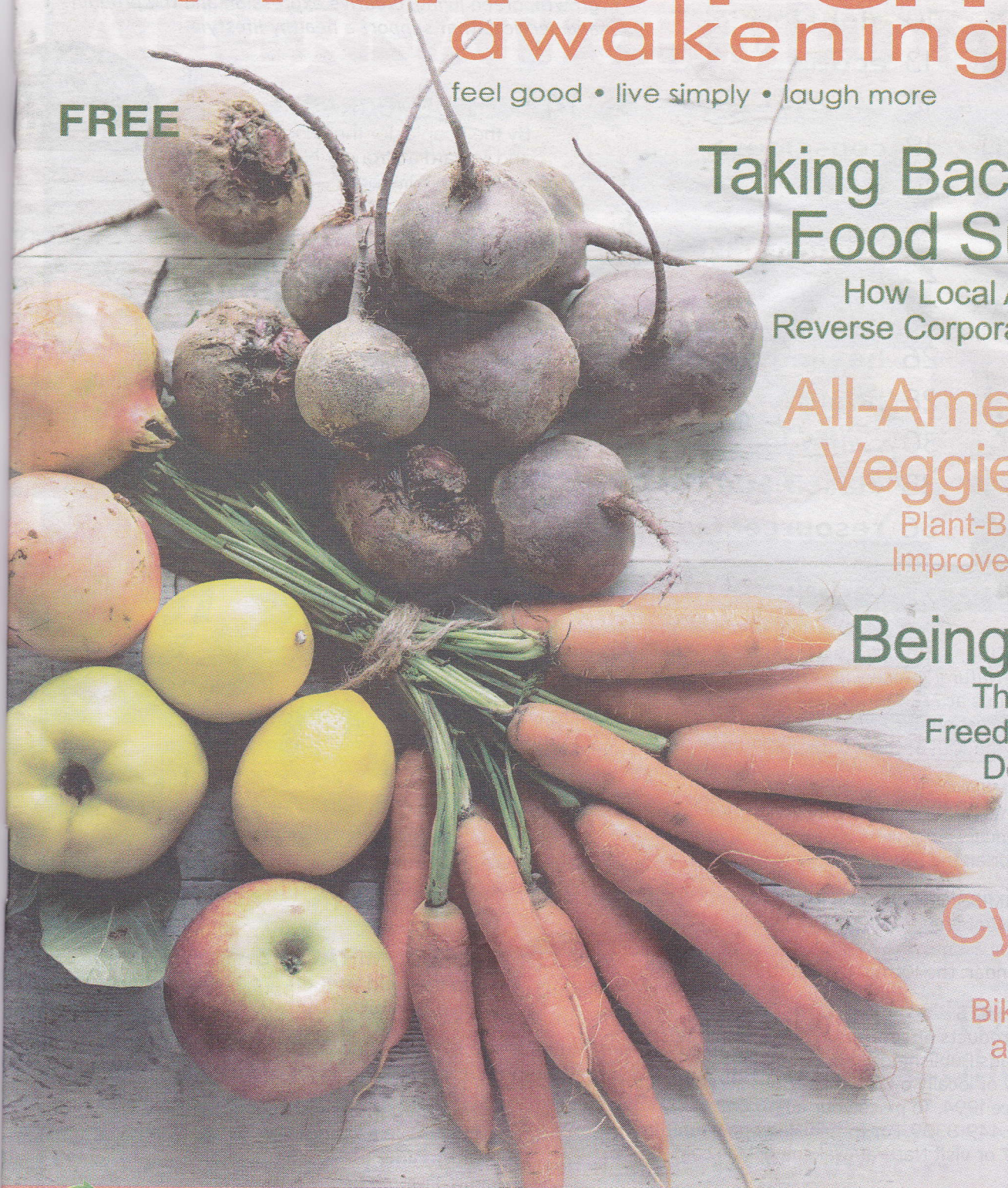
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