

Pushing Produce

Today's dog and cat diets incorporate a cornucopia of antioxidant-rich fruits and vegetables.

By Wendy Bedwell-Wilson

Carrots, cranberries and sweet potatoes make tasty treats for dogs, but broccoli, green beans and zucchini? As more pet food companies in today's health-conscious world cater to dog and cat owners who want to feed their pets diets rich in vitamins and antioxidants, more blends of disease-preventing fruits and vegetables are finding their way into pet food bags and onto store shelves.

It's a trend that Zoria Garces, retail advisor at Spot in New York City, thinks is here to stay.

"There's a push toward less synthetic vitamins and minerals in foods now because as people learn more about nutrition, they're realizing that the best way to get the antioxidants and vitamins is in their natural sources," Garces said. "Even in human nutrition, people are starting to pay more attention to what's in their food. And as their animals are as important to them as human children, they're paying attention to what's in their animals' food."

Though no scientific evidence has shown the benefits of such nutrients in pets specifically, Sean Delaney, DVM, M.S., Dipl. ACVN, a board-certified veterinary nutritionist and chief nutrition officer for Natura Pet Products in Santa Clara, Calif., said the nutritional benefits found in fruits and vegetables go far beyond simply providing vitamins and fiber. They also provide a range of antioxidants that can reduce cell damage in pets' and humans' bodies.

"Long-term chronic health problems begin with free radical damage, and so it inherently makes sense that fighting that would lead to better health," Dr. Delaney said. "You wouldn't want to narrow down and limit the plethora of natural antioxidants that you could be exposed to with fruits and vegetables in your diet that might have some benefits against oxidative damage. It's a hot topic and an area of interest that has a lot of implications for everyone, including dogs and cats."

But does the addition of a market basket full of fruits and vegetables, including trendy food fads, mean the diet is healthier? Peter Kaufman, co-owner of Complete Natural Nutrition based in Marshalltown, Iowa, questions whether more is better—or just more.

"We have a feeling that companies are putting these novel fruits and vegetables into their products primarily to capitalize on the humanization of our dogs and our cats, to appeal to the pet parent with ingredients that they're hearing about on Oprah or Dr. Oz, and that they're seeing in Vitamin Water and Snapple," said Kaufman, whose company manufactures a line of nutritional products.

"Vegetables and fruits, like acai and cranberries, are wonderful for their antioxidant qualities, but the questions are whether dogs and cats will benefit from their inclusion rates, and whether the fragile nutrients will survive the manufacturing process by the time they reach the animals," he said.

Trendy South American fruits or famous spokespersons aside, retailer Barbara Ratner, co-owner of Holistic Pet Cuisine and Market in Boca Raton, Fla., pushes produce whenever she can, especially in conjunction with an all-natural or organic diet.

"Remember: Green is good," she said. "Vegetables that are good for dogs include green beans, cabbage, carrots, broccoli, squash, sweet potatoes, yams, pumpkin and most other green leafy vegetables. Not only do these vegetables add healthy antioxidants to a pet's diet, but they also are a significant source of soluble fiber and roughage, which can promote intestinal health in a dog or cat," Ratner said. She added that Dr. Harvey's Veg-to-Bowl and Fruitables canned



pumpkin (manufactured by Vetscience LLC) are two of her shop's popular sellers.

Pet "super foods" differ little from human "super foods," said Shelley Gunton, "top dog" at Castor & Pollux Pet Works in Clackamas, Ore. Her company uses such items as organic apples, carrots, pumpkin, broccoli and quinoa to boost the antioxidant benefits of its canine and feline diets.

"We're looking at novel ways to get antioxidants into the food and find those amino acids, enzymes, vitamins and minerals in a purer form—and make sure they're available to the dog or cat nutritionally," she said.

Relative newcomers on the commercial pet-food scene, coconut chips and coconut oil, both of which contain medium-chain fatty acids, also offer a range of health benefits—from anti-viral, anti-fungal and anti-bacterial qualities to more a vibrant skin and coat and stronger immune system, said Carmina O'Connor, co-owner of Chicago-based Oscar Newman LLC, makers of CocoTherapy coconut oil and treats.

"Coconut contains lauric acid, and the only other place lauric acid is available in nature is breast milk," she said. "In pets, coconut oil provides a higher level of energy and vitality, protects dogs and cats from illness, and speeds healing. As a bonus, coconut oil improves a pet's skin and coat, improves digestion and reduces allergic reactions."

Some customers may question—if not balk at—the notion of including produce in pet foods. Pet professionals concerned about animal health should consider inviting food makers or distributors to discuss the benefits of feeding fruits and vegetables, Garces said.

"They're the ones who are most knowledgeable, so we ask them to highlight what their ingredients are and why they're in the foods," she said. "Companies realize the value in that now. And because there are so many more foods that are competing in this type of formulation, they realize that they have to educate staff and consumers directly if they're going to be the ones consumers pick." ■