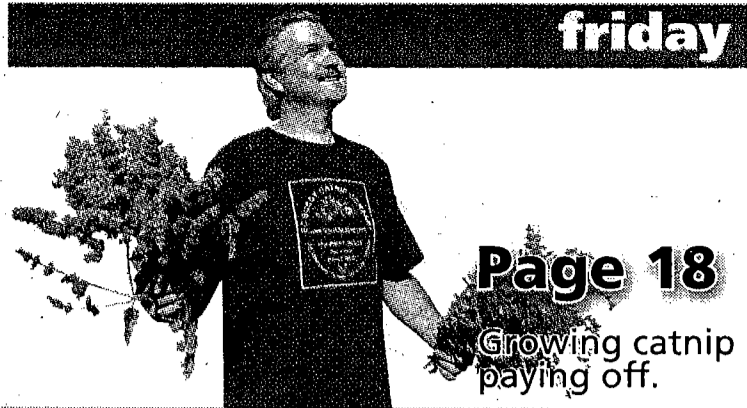


SALUTE TO VOLUNTEERS
Ida Williamson, Seniors Centre

times



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Growing catnip paying off.

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A18 FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2008 MAPLE RIDGE AND PITT MEADOWS TIMES

Community

Farmer finds cash crop in catnip

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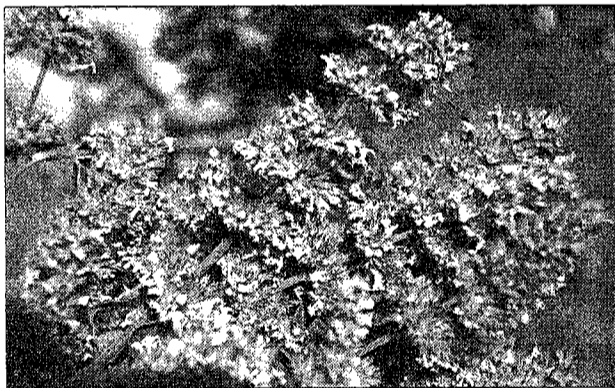
James Black wants his university grade changed. Years ago, he took a course that required him to come up with a business idea. He pitched a catnip farm. The professor pitched him a C-. When Black was recently going through the 10-year financial statements of his business, Kooky Kat, with his accountant, he realized his gross sales amounted to a million dollars. He decided to write a letter to the professor, asking if he could retroactively get a better grade. He's still waiting for the response. But he's not sitting around idly waiting since his catnip business takes up 18 hours of his day and a lot of his time is spent on his half-acre of catnip in Pitt Meadows with 17 cats he has taken in. Black grew up in Ontario where catnip grows in the wild. When he was taking the business course, which was

"I love cats — my livelihood comes entirely from cats," Black said. "It's good karma to help." A half an acre of catnip is heaven for his 17 cats. Emanating from the field of blue flowers is a buzz — it's the "catnip buzz," Black said of the approximately 30,000 bees flying around the catnip patch, as they suck nectar from the flowers. Black estimates his half acre of catnip, valerian and honeysuckle is worth about \$50,000 on its own, whereas if he grew hay, the same field would earn him around \$400. Growing catnip is a great example of the type of microfarming that takes place in the Fraser Valley, Black said. South Asian cats, for example, Siamese cats, don't react to catnip but they do react to valerian, which Black combines with catnip in many of his products. Black makes a valerian oil spray, a catnip spray and a honeysuckle oil spray. One of his favourite toys is



Maria Rantanen/TIMES

James Black on his Pitt Meadows catnip farm and (below) with one of his 17 cats.



an elective he took while completing a science degree, he started driving around the countryside in his old Ford Tempo, collecting catnip. His professor didn't believe his Kooky Kat product would fly — Black's classmates were pitching computer programs and other more modern products. By the end of the course, despite the C-, he was bar-coding his products and selling to pet store giant Pet Valu. His business paid for his last two years at the University of Waterloo and he continued it full-time upon graduation. "Every penny I make comes from catnip," Black said. Currently he sells his products worldwide. Black and his Kooky Kat business moved to B.C. in 1995. The catnip was being grown in the Okanagan until 2001 at which time he bought his farm in Pitt Meadows. Black also takes in abandoned cats, cats that are too old for others to take care of and cats found my neighbouring farmers.

a Hacky Kat Feline Aromatherapy Stress Ball, which will satisfy any stressed out cat. Catnip in Latin is Nepeta cataria, and is named after Nepet, a town in Italy where it grows indigenously. Catnip was used as tea before black tea was brought to Europe from China. It has a sedative effect on humans, much like Sleepytime tea, said Black. However, its effect on cats is just the opposite as it acts as an "excitatory agent" — it turns them on, Black said. Originally, Black just packaged and sold catnip buds. Now he also sells cat toys filled with catnip, valerium and honeysuckle. Animal rescuers make the toys he markets — which means he's inundated with clever cat toys — but before he sells them he takes the toys to a veterinarian who will inspect them for safety. One product he got was a woolen baggie with catnip, but a vet told him that wool fibres will expand in a cat's stomach and cause abdominal blockage. To learn about Kooky Kat products, go to www.kookykat.com.

