

## **Last Minute Gifts!**

With the magic of shopping via technology, it is never too late to order a gift to fill that gap on your list. It is probably no use telling a desperate shopper to avoid mindless shopping: this time of year there may not be any other kind.

Gardeners are easy to shop for: big gift – a truckload of pine nugget mulch; small gift – a bag of bulbs. We may be too late for catalog shopping but it is amazing what marvelous gifts you can find in catalogs. If it is a primarily plant catalog, a gift certificate plus that company's catalog is perfect for any friend whose mind you really can't read. (We all remember the embarrassing results when minds were misread.)

Catalog shopping is a venerable tradition and historically the items available have been astonishing. One very large example may be the Craftsman houses, piece by piece, that were obtained from the Sears Roebuck catalog early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Surely a brave purchase but the houses have earned acclaim becoming a wise investment. A smaller item in old garden catalogs was a box of toads. We have plenty of toads in our Tidewater gardens but there have been places where these prodigious eaters of bugs were scarce and needed to be replenished. In many places in the 19<sup>th</sup> century toads were offered in shops: they were readily available in France and in London's Covent Garden Market.

Houseplants are usually welcome as long as they come with care instructions. Some of us are poor guardians for the more temperamental plants. Do you remember the pretty vases with pebbles in water supporting lucky bamboo? They weren't bamboo but *Dracaena sanderiana*. All of the *Dracaenas* are easy-care plants with lovely foliage, plain or variegated, even striped. They do have a tendency to develop brown brittle tips on the leaves. This tip burn is not unusual in members of the lily family and there are varied causes. One is the low humidity when homes are heated: another cause can be fluoride in the water. In Gloucester County some deep wells have water with a high level of fluoride. These concentrations build up in the tips of *Dracaena* leaves causing brown tips.

Chlorine and salts may be retained in the soil and contribute to the problem. If you have fluoride and chlorine in your water it would be easier to replace *Dracaena* with another plant than to haul home bottled water. Incidentally some fertilizers sold for houseplants have salts in them and should be avoided. An outdoor plant, even a small tree, is a spectacular gift! Just make sure it comes complete with a hole.

Rather than a plant, a friend without ample shrubbery may appreciate an armload of fresh greenery to decorate her home. December is early for radical pruning but a discreet gathering of holly, juniper, camellias, yew and other evergreens won't harm the plants. Be sure the tool is sharp to avoid tearing the bark.

Even something as simple as a packet of seeds can be a neat gift, especially a variety so special that it is sold per seed and not by weight. Do you have a gourmet cook on your list who would be delighted with shiitake mushroom plugs? An all-round DIY-er might love a kit for soap making. This looks like such fun, the young might briefly put down their 'texting' devices and participate.

One special gift that requires that you be certain that it will be understood and well received is the one that goes, not to your friend or relation, but to a family or child in a faraway place. Someone on your list who is trying to simplify and downsize may welcome being the recipient of a gift going to some one needing that lamb or chicken or pig. The Heifer Program is one of those organizations that send important agricultural products to poverty stricken areas of

the world, products that are designed to give a family a chance to build a better life. “ World Vision” is another organization with the same mission. This ‘double’ gift will delight those people who actually believe the seasonal saying that “it is the thought that counts.” It may not be a good idea for anyone caught in a tit-for-tat gifting pattern. Their gifts must be wrapped with the receipt for exchange included.

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