

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



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The holidays approach!

The very idea stresses, right? If you are like me, you will do anything to avoid the malls and general frenzy.

I think many of us are at that point where we want to live meaningfully, are conscious of budgets and environmental concerns and so try to give thoughtful gifts. Over the years, I have simplified my gift giving approach to reflect my general philosophy and lifestyle. As a gardener, my gifts are garden and environment related. I think those basic ideas can be extrapolated to other interests.

I know gifts for teachers hold a significant place on your list. Let's face it, it's a challenge to give something nice to all those who teach our children and still keep within a budget. And I'm certain most teachers have received more than their fair share of tchotchkes. In the spirit of expressing my appreciation and not wanting to leave them with "stuff" I've always given potted bulbs like amaryllis or paperwhite narcissus. In the same vein, I like giving plants that I've started from cuttings of plants in my garden.

For the pots, I select regular terracotta pots, highball glasses found at tag sales or any other interesting containers. It is fun looking for such things throughout the year, and inexpensive to boot. Since I believe the student ought to be involved in the teacher gifting process, I have her help me pot the bulbs. Once potted, we arrange moss and pretty rocks on the soil surface. It not only makes for an attractive arrangement, but also weighs the bulb down so it will not shift as it grows.

I start these pots around the end of November, later for paperwhites, and tend to them until the time for giving is upon us. By that time, the bulbs have begun growing, but have not started blooming. This timing allows the recipient to get a lovely gift and still have the pleasure of anticipating the flowers. Once the blooms are done, the bulbs can be tossed on the compost heap. There is nothing to store or display forever. Of course, amaryllis can be kept to re-bloom each year, but that's entirely at the discretion of the recipient. A word of caution: Paperwhites have a very distinct fragrance. Some people love it and others can't stand it. When in doubt, do not give them as gifts. Amaryllis does nicely for all.

Give the gift of glorious gardens

I think one of the easiest and nicest gifts to give anyone is a membership to the region's botanical gardens, New York Botanical Gardens and Wave Hill, both in the Bronx. One does not need to be a gardener to enjoy visiting these places. In the process, you will be giving the gardens much needed support. I also give memberships to the Garden Conservancy, which is dedicated to preserving gardens across America. They also organize the much-enjoyed Open Days Program, which is reason enough to join. Right here in our own backyard is a Garden Conservancy treasure, Rocky Hills, which will one day become a public garden. You can make someone a friend of Rocky Hills through the Garden Conservancy.

Subscriptions to garden magazines are also a good gift. The reader will thank you throughout the year. Even non-gardeners enjoy thumbing through these publications.

Additions of plants, trees and bulbs to a friend's gardens are great gifts to give. So determine what someone would like to add to his or her garden and arrange to have that delivered at the appropriate planting time, or get them a gift certificate to a local nursery. Consider giving them the services of a garden designer if they are planning to garden a new space, or even just redoing it. But don't stop there. If you know their needs, a delivery of soil or mulch would be good. As you know, in New Castle for a very reasonable fee the recycling center can do the job for you. Likewise, think lawn service, tree service consultations, birdseed supply and even the latest in garden tools and gear. The needs of a garden and its gardener are endless!

Strapped for cash but with the heart of a gift giver? Offer your own services for planting, pruning, mowing, weeding and watering. Painting lawn furniture or assisting with a project such as laying a patio is a possibility as well. You can even grow vegetables or fruit in your own garden and allocate them to specific recipients. Give them a note telling them what to expect next year. Last year, an acquaintance who had lost his job gave as a gift a card stating he would garden-sit when the recipient was away on vacation. He willingly fulfilled that promise this past summer. The lucky friend said the peace of mind she had whilst away was a blessing and that returning to a well-tended garden was priceless.

Make your own list, and check it twice

While you are making your list, this is also a good time to think about what you would like to get for your own garden. Do the research and then make it easy for the others; they will have all the details to give you exactly what you desire. In the end everybody will be happy.

All of these ideas work for any occasion where gifts play a role. I recently helped someone come up with a wedding registry of sorts. The couple already had the property but could not afford the garden. From design service to plants and trees to statuary to compost bin, there is something for everyone to give. Nothing is outrageous. Big-ticket items can be covered by several givers. Also, projects can proceed in stages as gifts and funds become available.

So get busy and make your list. Be imaginative. For the one who does not need anything, buy a tree or bench in their honor for the local park. Arrange to purchase and donate the newest garden books to the library. Most libraries will put in a bookplate identifying the donor and in whose honor it was so donated. Get a local florist to deliver flowers on a regular basis; everybody loves flowers and no one can ever have enough.

I now wait to be asked by certain parties as to what my gardening heart desires. The list grows daily.