

Special Ways to Show You Care

Deb Maes, Extension Educator, Family & Consumer Resources

In mid-February, we usually take time to show our loved ones how special they are to us. Tradition dictates that we give candy, flowers, or a special dinner. I'd like to take a different spin on the traditional choices and focus on ways to show others you care about them and about keeping them healthy.

Let's start with candy—or more specifically chocolate. Humans have been eating some form of the cacao plant since the mid 400's AD. Initially it was a beverage that got better tasting with the addition of sugar. We didn't start using chocolate in baking until sometime in the 1800's. In 2011 chocolate was the number one food craved by women in North America. For men it was number two. People readily admit to being a “chocoholic.” In fact, the average American eats about twelve pounds of chocolate a year.

There is a reason for this. Chocolate tastes good, feels good on our tongue and helps us feel full. Research indicates that chocolate may even have some health benefits. The flavonoids in chocolate act as antioxidants and protect the body from aging, which can cause damage that leads to heart disease. The 2005 issue of *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* looked at new evidence that the consumption of dark chocolate can improve glucose metabolism and decrease blood pressure. It is still too early to make a recommendation that everyone should eat dark chocolate every day to be healthy, but wouldn't that be great if it turned out to be true?

As with all recommendations, we need to remember that everything should be in moderation. If you find yourself with a chocolate craving, keep in mind that chocolates are a high calorie food, so eat them in moderation.

So, if you want to buy some candy for someone special, buy some good dark chocolate and tell your loved one that your gift is full of health benefits—it is your way of showing them how important they are to you.

Let's next look at the traditional gift of flowers. Valentine's Day is one of the year's biggest days for the florist industry. But let's think about it a little differently. Instead of flowers, how about giving someone an herb garden for their windowsill?

Strange idea? Maybe not. Based on the data from the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, most of us need to consume less sodium in our food. We know this but many of us seem reluctant to give up the salt shaker. Salt is a flavor enhancer that makes our food taste better. So why not give someone tasty herbs (such as basil, parsley and chives) that they can substitute for salt, actually helping them to use less sodium while still eating good tasting food. No windowsill? Try a hanging basket that can be put near the food preparation area, as well as a pair of shears to help them harvest their flavors quickly. The plants will keep on growing with a little care. So, instead of ordering flowers, see if your local florist can put together an arrangement of herb plants, and look for some new recipes that will put your gift to use.

Finally, here's my last suggestion for a special present. Many of the people I have talked to recently have indicated that they feel overwhelmed by life. They are too stressed to really enjoy their day to day events.

Too much stress can cause headaches, trouble sleeping, and digestive problems. There are many benefits to managing stress. When you have less stress, you look better, are more productive and are better able to focus on whatever task you are involved in. Therefore managing stress produces a happier and healthier person.

What can you do to help someone de-stress? Consider giving them a gift certificate for a massage. How about a manicure/pedicure? Is there a spa nearby? Make sure you can take over the home chores to see that the recipient gets to properly enjoy his/her gift. Consider buying a stress relaxation video or CD that could be used when there are only a few minutes to relax. Research shows that relaxing even ten minutes a day can provide a way to reduce stress.

You will have to decide what is the best way to show your loved one that you care. Make February 14th, and every other day, special for both of you.