



Gifts from the Garden

The gift-giving season is with us and who could be easier to choose or make a gift for than a gardener? It's so easy, because most of us who garden like almost everything. Small or large, useful or frivolous, there are many items that are easy to make and guaranteed to bring pleasure. Most of these also make a great hostess gift for a holiday party.

A very simple and quick gift to make is a vase with bulbs of paperwhites. Paperwhite narcissus have small white flowers with a delicate fragrance. They're just the thing to bring cheer on a gloomy, January day. By planting them in a wide-bottomed vase that is at least 5 to 6 inches tall, you can avoid flopping leaves, a common problem with paperwhites. To start, cover the bottom of the vase with pebbles or small gravel (about an inch of pebbles should do the job). Place the bulbs on top of the gravel, and then add another ½ inch of pebbles to hold the bulbs in place. Tie a ribbon around the vase with directions attached for the recipient, and you're ready to go.

Directions for paperwhites: Place enough water in the gravel beneath your paperwhite bulbs so that it just barely touches the base of the bulbs. As roots develop, the water level may be allowed to drop slightly below the base of the bulbs. Place in a cool, bright spot and in 2 to 3 weeks you will be able to enjoy the fragrance of these mini-daffodils. After blooming, the bulbs should be discarded. Their food reserves are too depleted for a second round of bloom.

Another simple plant gift is an amaryllis bulb that is self-contained with its own pot, saucer and soil. To purchase either paperwhites or amaryllis bulbs go to your local garden center. For the amaryllis, pick out the bulb and then select an attractive pot with a matching saucer that is about 1 inch larger in diameter than the bulb. Cut out a piece a coffee filter that is slightly smaller in diameter than the bottom of the pot. Place the filter circle in the bottom of the pot and then put a plastic bag in the pot. Fill approximately ½ to 2/3 of the bag with potting soil and then close it with a twist tie. Place the amaryllis bulb on top of the soil, use the pot saucer as a lid (place it upside down), and then secure the whole thing with a matching ribbon. Either include directions inside the pot, or attach them on the outside.

Directions for amaryllis: Plant your amaryllis with about 1/3 to ½ of the bulb above the soil surface. Water the bulb, and then place the pot in a well-lighted area that receives at least four hours of direct sunlight each day. A southern window is best, while an eastern or western facing window is second best. In a week or so, a flower stalk will emerge from the bulb. Your amaryllis should flower within a few weeks. Leaves usually start to grow as the bulb begins to flower. If you wish to keep your amaryllis after flowering, remove the flower stalk before it sets seed to encourage active growth.

Another easy gift to make is an evergreen swag. In early December you can cut a number of greens from your garden, tie the branches together at the top with a stout piece of twine and attach a large bow. Making a swag for yourself or someone else is just that easy! Almost any evergreen plant will work in a swag. You can even plan your annual pruning for late fall in order to use the clippings for Christmas greens. Most landscapes have at least some of the following: pine, spruce, hemlock, rhododendron, juniper, mountain laurel, boxwood, holly or winterberry. Your swag will be most attractive if it is composed of foliage with different textures. If you're lucky enough to have winterberry, the red berries make a nice contrast. If not, you can attach a small bell or Christmas decoration for contrast.

If you are really pressed for time, you can buy a flowering potted plant like a cyclamen, Christmas cactus, poinsettia or kalanchoe. Then purchase an attractive pot that is the same size, and simply slip your flowering plant into the new pot. It's simple and looks like it took lots of time and effort, something most people really appreciate.

Slightly harder to do are wreaths. For these you will need to purchase a foam or other type of frame for the wreath and a glue gun. Fall walks through the woods should yield a variety of pine, hemlock and spruce cones that can be glued to the wreath. If you paint the frame brown before you begin, you won't see any bare spots. Contrasting decorations will make your wreath even more attractive.

If you're really ambitious, you can design a garden as a gift to a new gardener. Include garden plot plans and a book for choosing plants. Or buy a complete garden kit; most come pre-packaged and contain both a plan and the necessary seeds.

Or just use your imagination and you'll come up with even more creative gift ideas!

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