

## GIFTS FROM A GARDENER by Kelly Noel

December is a month when there are many reasons to invite friends into your home – to share a cultural or religious celebration or just to enjoy the camaraderie of good friends on a cold winter evening. When you are invited to spend an evening with friends it is traditional to take along a little something that conveys a thank you to your hosts.

### Sidebar

Buddhists celebrate a 30 day festival which begins on December 8, Bodhi Day, the Day of Enlightenment. This commemorates the time in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE when the historical Buddha began teaching the Noble Truths of the Buddhist way.

Hanukkah, the 8-day Jewish Festival of Light, commemorates an event that took place almost 2200 years ago. A small band of Israelites achieved an unexpected victory over a much stronger enemy and liberated their people from oppression. The date is determined by the Hebrew calendar but always starts some time in December, this year on December 6.

Christians remember the birth of Jesus Christ on December 25<sup>th</sup>, but the entire month of December before that day seems taken up with the celebration of Christmas.

The first Kwanzaa was held in the US in 1966. It was designed for the African diaspora as a way to celebrate their heritage and culture and is held each year from December 26 to January 1.

### A “Living” Gift

A good host/hostess gift is something that is useful as well as decorative. It is best if it is consumable - none of us needs another knick-knack! A frequent choice is a bottle of wine – usually a welcome gift but not one that is very imaginative! If you are a gardener, why not choose something from the garden – something that will represent you.

You could give a potted plant – a “living” gift. There are at least three winter-blooming plants that can safely be given even to someone who considers themselves a “brown thumb”. These plants are readily available every fall at reasonable prices and are usually treated as disposable so there is no pressure on the recipient to be able to keep them alive!

The plant most associated with Christmas is the poinsettia, no doubt because just at the right time, the leaves surrounding the little yellow flowers turn a bright red. Hybridizing has produced every shade of red from maroon to scarlet to pink and even white and yellow but red is still the popular choice. More poinsettias are sold each year than any other potted plant, virtually all of these in November and December.

*Cyclamen persicum* is not so associated with Christmas so could be a more appropriate choice if it is not a Christmas event. Cyclamen flowers are held aloft on thin stems and look like butterflies coming to land on the heart-shaped leaves. There are several colour choices - white, pink, lavender, red - and many of them have leaves with attractive variegation.

Another good choice is *Kalanchoe blossfeldiana* aka Flaming Katy. Its succulent green leaves are topped with masses of tiny blossoms in a range of bright colours - yellow, orange, red, white, pink or purple. Both Cyclamen and Kalanchoe can be kept from year to

year but, like the poinsettia, they are usually discarded.

Of course, if your host has and enjoys caring for house plants, there are many other choices that would be appreciated - perhaps a lovely African violet (*Saintpaulia*) or a Phalenopsis orchid, both of which are readily available. Don't be tempted by a Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgessii*) which is notorious for dropping its flower buds with any change in heat or humidity, and the trip from the store to your home and then to your friend's is more than enough to cause this, making for a disappointing display.

Before buying any plant, check it carefully and pick a healthy specimen and preferably one that has just started to bloom. Avoid those which have a dusting of pollen on the flowers which indicates a more mature plant. Make sure it is wrapped well to protect it from the cold during transport.

Another "living gift" for a gardener who also likes to cook is small pots of herbs for the kitchen window sill. Choose herbs that are frequently clipped fresh for use in cooking. Chives, parsley, basil, rosemary or oregano are all good choices. If you plan far enough ahead, you could easily grow all of these but rosemary from seed yourself.

### **Other choices**

For someone who gardens outdoors during the growing season, a pair of nice gardening gloves would always be useful. The latest edition of a popular garden magazine would be something to relax over the day after the party.

If you grow herbs yourself, you can spend some time in the fall drying and packaging them. Air-drying can take about a week - but is a good method for oregano, dill and rosemary. Mints and basil contain too much moisture for air-drying but can be dried in a low oven in about 3 hours. The herbs are considered "dried" once the leaves crumble easily. Put them in small ziploc bags and attach a colourful label

If you make jams or jellies or other preserves, put some in smaller jars that hold about 100ml. These are a perfect size for gift giving. If it is a pre-Christmas party, make a jar of cranberry sauce. Locally-grown fresh cranberries are available in late fall and all you need is some sugar, water and a few minutes of boiling time to produce the traditional sauce. You could easily prepare this on party day.

Most supermarkets sell cut flowers year round so it is possible to put together something bright that will be decorative for at least a week. Put these in a simple dollar store vase so the host does not have the chore of putting them in water when you arrive. It is also possible to buy winter arrangements made with evergreens and cones, perhaps sprigs of holly or mistletoe, that will last much longer.

Whatever your gift may be, wrap it in colours to suit the particular holiday - blue and white for Hanukkah; red and green for Christmas; multi-coloured for Bodhi Day; red, green and black for Kwanzaa; your choice for a winter get-together. If there are many invited guests, attach a tag and put your name on it. Your hosts may not have time to acknowledge your gift as their guests arrive but will want to know later who to thank for each one - although they may be able to recognize the special gift from their gardener friend

