Slug:	Ask the Master Gardener
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As the days grow significantly shorter and perceptibly darker, gardening activities decrease. In the meantime, the need to prepare for the upcoming holidays becomes more pressing. Although we all look forward to decorating and being with friends and family, the selecting and giving of gifts is quite a challenge. Think about alternatives to the traditional search for gifts at the malls. Combine a love of gardening with the need to express affection for friends and family by creating some gifts and selecting others from local nurseries and garden shops.

Not all the people on your list will be gardeners, so this is not just about gifts for people who would love to have a new trowel or a great hose hangar. However, don't overlook those items, because there may be people who would just love a new hose hangar. Those people are probably limited, so here are some more creative suggestions.

Container gardens are generally a very welcome addition to the front walkway, deck or porch in any home. Creating one can be fun and with some good potting soil, an attractive pot and the help of the folks at your local nurseries or a call to the WSU Extension office for any additional advice, this can be accomplished. At the holidays, with the combination of dark evergreen foliage plants (miniatures are readily available), ferns (Dryopteris erythrosora), ornamental grasses (Festuca amethystina or Festuca glauca), and common red or white primroses massed together, you can create a wonderful outdoor garden to give to someone. With the addition of the traditional red bow, the gift is complete.

An herb container garden can be created for the cooks on your list. At this time of year, purchase four-inch pots of herbs at the more comprehensive nurseries. A selection of thyme (<u>Thymus vulgaris</u>), rosemary, common sage or garden sage, parsley (Italian is more flavorful and has a flat leaf, French is a pretty garnish and is tightly curled), and oregano (<u>O. majorana known as sweet marjoram or O. vulgare known as oregano</u>) will bring joy to the hearts of favorite cooks. For a very special chef, a sweet bay tree (<u>Laurus nobilis</u>) can be given as a potted shrub or for transplanting into the garden.

For those of us who simply run short on time, don't forget that a pretty arrangement in a vase is a wonderful gift. Purchase some florist's foam and an attractive container. Then comb your own garden for evergreens and holly, purchase some flowers from the grocery store and create an arrangement that lasts all holiday season, gracing the dining room table for various dinners.

Either creating arrangements or giving plants or commercial arrangements are ways that holiday giving can brighten the homes of friends and family. And, don't forget those gardeners in your life. Do check out the hose hangars and trowels. Something might be found that will truly gladden their hearts as they look forward to getting out in the garden again soon.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.