

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Gardening books are always a nice gift for the home gardener. There are multitudes of gardening books on the market these days, but one of the most 'useful' ones for this area is Sunset's New Western Garden Book. It contains the basics on plant culture, plus a comprehensive western plant encyclopedia and detailed climate zone maps. The organic gardener might enjoy Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades, Guide to Natural Gardening by Steve Solomon. Gardening With Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest by Arthur R. Kruckberg, a retired University of Washington professor, is a good choice for those concerned with the environment and it covers trees, shrubs, and herbaceous perennials along with source lists for obtaining them.

For those beginning a perennial garden, A Year in Bloom and The Border in Bloom are good choices by Ann Lovejoy. If a definitive reference book for perennials is desired, Perennials for American Gardens by Ruth Clausen and Nicolas Ekstrom is a good one and so is Perennial Garden Plants by Graham Stuart Thomas, an English author whose information is useful in our similar climates.

Rose books are beautiful books to give. Random House's Guide to Roses by Roger Phillips and Martyn Rix has over 1400 colorful roses within its pages. A great reference book on the care of roses is Roses by Richard Ray and Michael Mae Caskey because of the detailed illustrations of how to care for roses. The Glory of Roses by C. Baker and Allen Lacy makes a beautiful coffee table book full of photos of roses in gardens throughout Europe. Graham Thomas' The Art of Gardening with Roses is a useful book that not only includes photos, but also tells the names of plants that look good with roses in the garden.

A good book for the beginning gardener is Color in the Garden by Penelope Hobhouse. This book explains the basics about using color as well as describing and showing plants in each color for each season.

Amaryllis bulbs are also a popular gift at holiday time. Whether giving to others or receiving, here are some tips that will make an amaryllis last for several years.

First, the pot must have drainage holes in the bottom. If it doesn't, either repot in a pot that does, or make some. The pot should allow two to three inches between the bulb and the edge of the pot. No more than three inches! Use well-drained potting soil that contains some gritty stuff, like pumice or perlite. If it came with soil that seems to be nothing more than peat, amend it with some of the gritty material.

Plant the bulb with one half to two thirds of the bulb below the soil, leaving one third to one half the bulb above ground. Firm soil lightly and water well immediately. Then, don't water again until growth starts, unless it seems to be drying out completely. Soil should be just barely moist.

Place your pot in as bright a spot as possible with temperatures of sixty to seventy degrees Fahrenheit. The flower stalks usually appear first, followed by strap-like leaves. Increase watering as leaves form, keeping soil evenly moist, not soggy. Wet, airless soil can cause root rot. When the top inch of soil dries out, it's time to water again. Fertilize lightly every two to three weeks throughout the flowering period.

When blooms fade, cut off flower stalks, but continue to water and feed until foliage begins to yellow, usually around late August or September. Then, withhold water and store indoor in a cool, dry place for two to three months. It can be dark, but darkness isn't necessary.

It is important that the amaryllis receives no water during this resting period.

After the resting period, repot your bulb, water and place in a bright spot again. If your care has been adequate, a flower stalk or two should appear first. If none appear, something was amiss in your maintenance routine. If proper care is taken, Amaryllis bulbs can bloom for ten years or more.

The gift of gardening is a wonderful gift any time of the year!

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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 Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
