
Holiday Gifts of Edible Plants

By Phyllis Pugnetti

During the holiday season it's nice to have a few small gifts on hand. Edible plants make attractive and useful gifts. You can buy potted plants on sale at the end of the garden season, or plan ahead, planting in spring or summer so edible plants are ready in December. Most houseplants, including edibles, grow better when placed out of drafts, in bright indirect light away from windows that are too hot during the day and too cold at night. Water deeply, then wait until the soil gets fairly dry before watering again. Do not wait until plants wilt. Once a month give plants some liquid fertilizer and they should be good to go.

A simple choice is a large pot of lettuce planted from seed in September. The leaves provide beautiful textures and colors of chartreuse, green, blue-grey, and red. You can harvest the outer leaves and the center of the plants will continue to grow. Fresh garden salad at Christmas is a real treat!

Mint is a great plant for beginners because it's so hard to kill. It is a long-lived perennial plant that becomes invasive. When planted directly into the garden, mint literally will take over your whole yard! However, its growth is easily contained in a pot. A small mint seedling purchased in May or June will fill a 10–12-inch pot by December. It has an attractive mounding growth habit and pleasant smell. Divide mint every spring and you'll have several small plants each year. Potted mint can be grown outside all year round, although it dies to the ground in winter and regrows from the roots in the spring. If you want to harvest mint in winter, just bring the pot inside when it starts getting cold at night.

Many perennial herbs are hardy enough to grow outside year-round. Thyme, oregano, sage, and Arp Rosemary should be purchased as seedlings in May or June rather than trying to start from seeds. Plant seedlings in 6–8-inch pots. They will get off to a slow start but should be nice sized plants by December. These perennial plants will live for years when transplanted into larger pots and moved outdoors. For gifts you should bring them inside around the middle of October, so they have fresh new growth in time for the holidays.

Hot peppers can be planted from seed in early June or from seedlings in mid-July, to be mature by Christmas. They'll need an 8–10-inch pot and can be grown outdoors until nighttime temperatures begin to drop into the 50s. Bring the pepper plants inside so they have new growth for the holidays. Hot peppers are very ornamental with lots of small fruits in colors of yellow, green, purple, and red. They prefer at least 8 hours a day of bright light and temperatures around 70-75 degrees. Supplemental lighting may be needed to keep them leafy and green.

Citrus trees make beautiful gifts. Meyer lemon trees are compact in size and grow well in pots. They can be grown outside when daytime temperatures are warm but bring them inside once nighttime temperatures start to drop into the 40s. They don't mind our summer heat but do like a

little afternoon shade. For information about their specific soil and water needs check out, *How to Grow Meyer Lemons* by Carol Barany, Yakima Herald, February 26, 2023. Meyer lemon trees are not always available locally but are well worth the search. Expect seedlings to be about 8-12 inches tall, with maybe 2 or 3 leaves per branch. A seedling purchased in May should be a full leafy plant, reaching a size of 2 feet tall and wide by December. Do not expect fruits until the second or third year. The fruits will be smaller and sweeter than regular lemons.

Edibles are no more difficult to grow than any other houseplant. When you put them in attractive pots, with festive bows, fairy lights, or tiny ornaments, you transform ordinary edible plants into inexpensive, yet thoughtful Christmas gifts. Happy Holidays!



For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.

Hot peppers (left), purple basil (middle), peppermint (right), rosemary (small pot right), Meyer lemon tree in back.