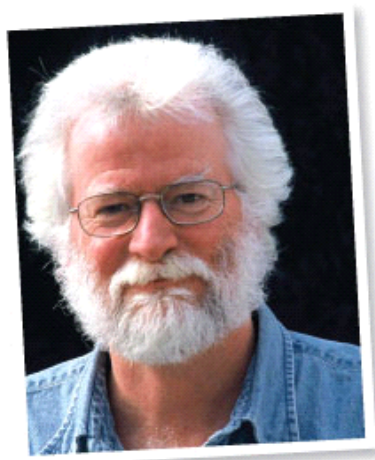


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Of Gifts & Gardeners

John Friel



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I'm not a retailer, and I don't play one on TV, but I am a retail customer, and these are my gifting dos and don'ts.

DO: Knives and Flashlights

In any store, but especially hardware stores and outfitters, I gravitate to these two items. Yeah, it's mostly, but not exclusively, a guy thing.

"Flashlight" covers a wide range in the LED era. Goodbye old-school D-cell cylinders; hello camp lanterns, headlamps, little find-the-keyhole keychain dangles and blazing mega-foot-candle torches, as the Brits say. Kids love a new flashlight and some of us never outgrew the fascination.

Headlamps aren't just for spelunkers; they're wonderful anywhere, gardening included. Running out of daylight with one last paver to place? Slap on the headlamp. It frees both hands and the light is always right where you need it.

Just don't blind your helper when you turn to talk to them.

"Knife" is similarly expansive. Among mankind's first tools, evolving from stone through bronze to high-carbon steel and ceramic, good cutting edges are always on the cutting edge of design and desirability. A favorite for delving in the dirt: the hori-hori, a traditional Japanese garden knife/trowel/saw that allegedly dates to the 13th century.

Today's version has a thick curved blade etched with inch markers for measuring planting depth. Even if you grow in raised beds where weeds seldom intrude, it's a useful tool. Look for full-tang blades and comfortable grips. Mine required customizing with a belt sander to be easier on the hand.

DON'T: Get Too Clever

I purchased loppers with telescoping handles, assuming they'd increase my reach and leverage. Well, they do—barely, and only in certain situations. If the branch you're attempting to lop is thicker than a finger, by the time you've gripped it, your arms are stretched wide, the blades are in your face and your leverage is gone.

Worse, on mine, the twist/lock handles kept unlocking and sliding when I didn't want them to. The device still hangs in my shed, and still sees use, but the handles are duct-taped to a fixed length. Not a catastrophe, just a costly lesson. Moral: Evolution isn't always progress. Keep simple tools simple.

DO: Plants-by-Mail

This may be heresy between these covers, but I bought my daughter a subscription to a service that ships plants, planters and accessories to your home. She's a dedicated green thumb who normally needs no such assistance, but a long, bleak New England winter with an energetic toddler constitutes extenuating circumstances.

The six-month subscription provided something to open, explore, assemble and nurture together. It helped keep everyone sane until spring, when the local GC reopened. And it's helping to hook a future gardener.

DON'T: Scrape Bottom

Two friends gave me string trimmers identical to mine. Why? Because theirs wouldn't run either and I thought I could Frankenstein one good one out of them. Nope.

We all paid the price for saving a few bucks. They worked well for a few years, then became temperamental. I finally gave them all to a guy who fixes and resells such things, and bought a good one. Yanking a rope repeatedly, fruitlessly, evokes that "definition of insanity" trope. With power tools, for yourself or as gifts, don't cheap out.

DO: Gift Cards

Perhaps you disparage gift cards as the last refuge of the unimaginative. Fine, but please remember, no two people have the same tastes and you can't always know what your intended recipient already has.

I love those cards, to give and receive. They're easily re-gifted, and if my imagination fails me, too, there's always room for another knife or flashlight. **GP**

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