

BY SANDRA NEIL

green gifts

Joyful, natural shopping

Green gift giving gets easier every year, but it still takes a little ingenuity and planning to select tokens of your appreciation that ring true to your conscience and the environment.

Specialty gift baskets are always fun to assemble and make thoughtful presents. Growing up, we'd receive an enormous food basket from my father's company during the holidays. I kept the tins that were filled with English toffee to put hair barrettes in—after devouring the sweet treats. But so many of the delicacies were vacuum-packed in plastic, then finished off in cellophane wrapping. While I certainly enjoy the memories of those mouthwatering foods, you can recreate the experience for others as a more conscientious consumer.

THE BEST BASKETS

Keeping in mind foods with the least amount of packaging (and thinking of edibles I'd love to receive!), one of my favorites is a gift basket loaded with organic fruits. Fill a sustainable wooden basket, bowl, or tray (acacia, water hyacinth, and bamboo work well) with organic produce. If possible, add items grown in your area—which means cranberries and pumpkins for me. You can shred Kraft paper to make a nest for the fruit, add reusable cloth produce bags for storage, or mix in locally made relishes and jams. But instead of wrapping the basket in plastic, use a colorful recycled or cloth shopping bag, or a cotton net cinched with a raffia bow.

SWEET UPCYCLED CONTAINERS

If you're looking for simple party favors or a hostess gift, think about locally produced honey or maple syrup. I keep smaller glass jars on hand and fill them from larger containers, then top the lids with fabric and a label indicating the grade of the sweet treat and where it's from. Attaching a wooden honey dipper is always a nice touch.

GIFTS TO SIP

Whether you prefer coffee over tea or like the beverages hot versus cold, specialty coffees and teas are hot trends.

And chances are a few people on your list enjoy one or the other. In fact, 154 million—half of the American population—have become tea drinkers. We've actually surpassed the UK when it comes to importing tea. Specialty tea houses say it's because of the health benefits of the drink.

Teas also come in gorgeous boxes or canisters perfect for adding to a basket. Herbal and fruit teas are now popular in smoothies and desserts, and have also found their way into the spice cupboard (think spice tea orange marmalade chicken). But the newest trends are flowering teas (when kissed with a little hot water, they bloom into beautiful floral shapes and have a subtle taste), as well as darker, Pu'er teas that smell and taste musty (my favorite).

Light roasted coffees and micro roasters are getting the nod these days, and so is more transparency in labeling. Look for where and how the beans are grown—from Fair Trade to socially responsible programs. Some labels even include the farmer's name and the elevation of the crop.

A SPA PACKAGE

For the aromatherapy lover, try filling a ceramic bowl with unexpected but much appreciated items for tired feet. Spas across the country are focusing on foot treatments this year. Give someone all the DIY tools needed for an at-home medi-pedi: A few drops of lemon, rosemary, and peppermint essential oils added to a bowl of warm water makes for a soothing soak. Add some almond oil for slathering on post-pedi.

Vet the product

Concerned about whether your gift choices (basket or other booty) meet your standards for green, clean, or social responsibility? Check out www.goodguide.com. It's a sponsored site where independent scientists, nutritionists, and academics have rated nearly 200,000 consumer products from soaps and gadgets to food. TFL

It's not about money

Looking for something that doesn't cost a thing? Consider becoming part of a Time Bank. Members exchange services, like an hour helping someone with gardening in exchange for a massage or getting your business cards designed. Time Banks are cropping up across the country (California and Vermont have the most active websites so far). Sites keep track of the feel-good hours you've earned helping a community member. What gift is better than that? Learn more at community.timebanks.org.