

Dakota Gardener

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A newsletter for gardeners in North Dakota

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Gift ideas for gardeners

The holidays are here—and so are the busiest shopping days of the year!

Selecting the right gift can be a challenge sometimes. It's nice to know that many of our friends enjoy gardening. Here are a few gift ideas to consider:

Let's start with a beautiful flowering houseplant. The delicate, glistening blooms of a Christmas cactus makes it a special gift. Poinsettia, azalea, and cyclamen also have dazzling blooms. An orchid would be a very special flower gift. Its blooms will outlast all of the traditional holiday plants.

Foliage houseplants make a nice gift that can provide for years of pleasure. Put the plant in a colorful ceramic pot to add a special touch. Give them a Norfolk Island pine (which looks like a tiny Christmas tree) and decorate it with gift ornaments. Maybe add a set of automatic watering globes—they even look like Christmas ornaments!

A dried flower arrangement is another colorful gift idea that provides long-lasting beauty.

Good pruning tools are always appreciated. Also, a new shovel,

wheelbarrow or garden cart will be useful around the house.

If you are on a smaller budget, consider giving some accessories such as a pocket knife, pair of gloves, or a kneeling pad.

For the gardener who enjoys reading, there is a wide selection of books available on gardening. Give a subscription to a gardening magazine and they will remember you all year.

Thermometers, rain gauges and weather vanes provide valuable weather information to a gardener. For the gardener who seems to have everything, wind chimes or a garden fountain can add the dimension of sound to a landscape.

Enjoy shopping and have a happy holiday season!



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HOLIDAY FEATURE STORIES

Real Xmas trees are good for the environment

Do you feel guilty about having a tree killed for Christmas? You shouldn't. Real Christmas trees are *good* for the environment and certainly better than artificial trees, which may take decades to decompose after they are thrown away.

Evergreen trees are a renewable resource. For every Christmas tree harvested in North Dakota, up to three seedlings are planted. Christmas tree growers produce their trees on land that is generally not suitable for other crops. Christmas tree plantings support wildlife by providing the animals with shelter.

Approximately 100,000 real Christmas trees are sold annually in North Dakota, with around 8% grown in our state. The most popular tree among our growers is Scotch pine, which is very hardy.



Christmas trees can be easily recycled. Cut off the branches and use them for mulching—they are an outstanding mulch over perennial flowers or roses. The trunk can be dried and used for firewood, or it can be chipped and

used for mulching. Many families lay their tree in the backyard near their bird feeder and use it for winter wildlife habitat for the birds.

Foolproof holiday plants

Do you have trouble growing houseplants? Don't worry, here are two holiday plants that are absolutely foolproof.

Amaryllis is a most spectacular bulb. *Amaryllis* literally means "lily of love" and you will quickly fall in love with it!

Plant each bulb so that one-half of it is above the soil line. After planting, water the bulb thoroughly and put it in a bright

cool room. Keep it away from direct sun and water sparingly until growth appears.

Once it starts to grow, move the pot to a sunny window. You'll swear it grows so fast that you can actually "hear" it grow.

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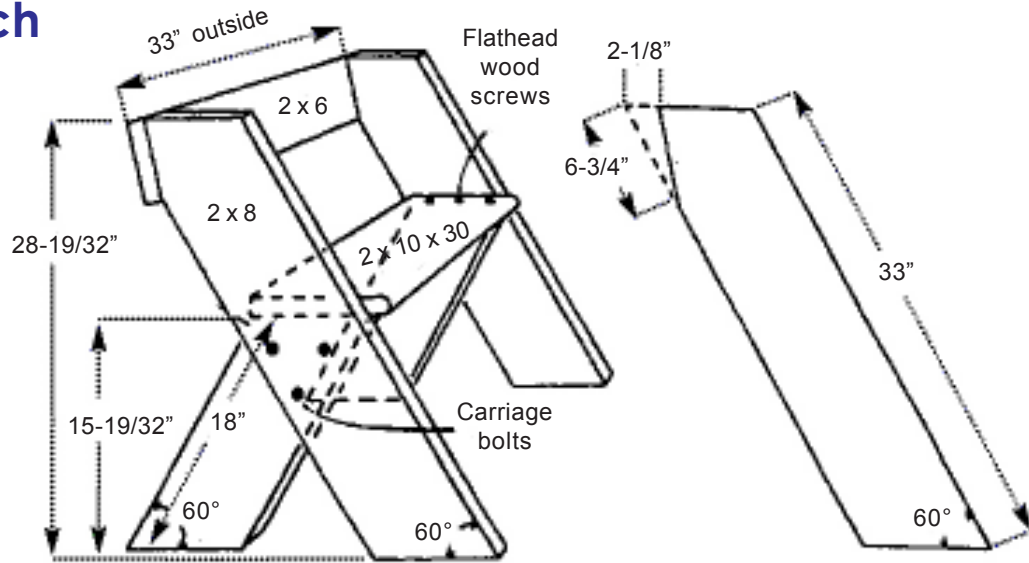


Homemade gifts are special!

Aldo Leopold Bench

The most heartfelt Christmas gifts are homemade. This simple garden bench can be a beautiful addition to any landscape. It's named after Aldo Leopold, a famous naturalist from the Midwest.

Materials: One 2" x 6" x 33", one 2" x 10" x 30", one 2" x 8" x 10', six 3/8" x 3-1/2" carriage bolts with washer and nut, twelve 3/8" x 3-1/2" #12 or #14 flathead wood screws. Douglas fir is usually used for this bench, but you can customize it to your taste and size. The materials listed will make a 33" bench, but you may choose to construct it 48" long.



Source: Wild Ones of Wisconsin

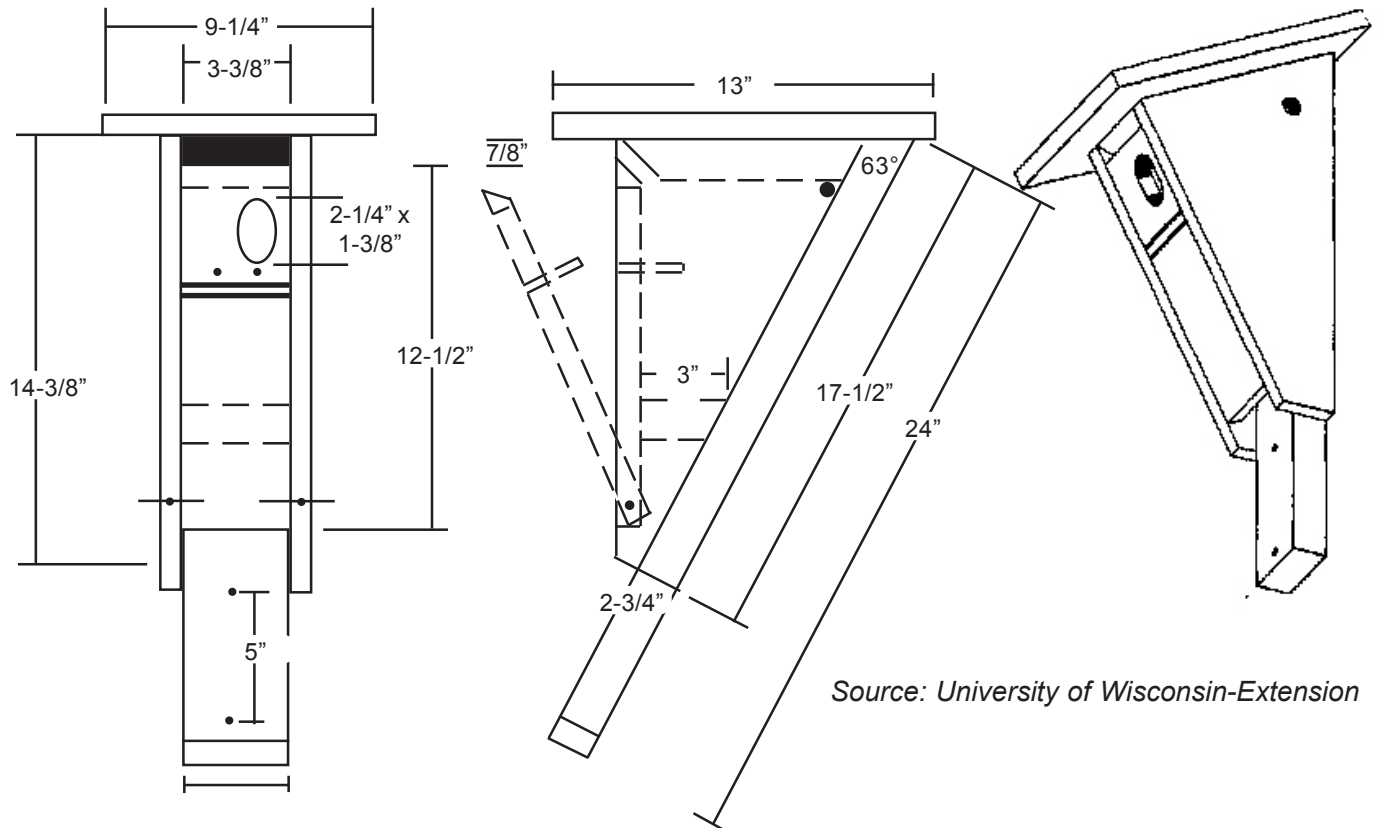
Peterson Bluebird House

The eastern bluebird is a gentle bird and is beloved for its bright blue and orange plumage. Once endangered, the bluebird is making a remarkable comeback.

Years of extensive testing in Minnesota have shown the Peterson bluebird house to be a preferred nesting box. It's a little more difficult to construct com-

pared to the standard rectangular boxes, but its beauty and the increased odds of attracting a

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Source: University of Wisconsin-Extension



Holiday plants bring joy to the world!

Why do we cut down trees and put them inside our homes? Why do people kiss under mistletoe (which literally means “twig with dung on it”)? And by the way, what is a yule log anyhow? These holiday traditions have special meanings in our lives and it’s fun to find out how they started.

Let’s start with the Christmas tree. Bringing trees into homes is a custom that goes back to the days of the Roman and Egyptian dynasties, perhaps even further. This is especially true of evergreens, which in many cultures symbolize long life and fertility.

The Christmas tree tradition in Europe may have begun with the celebration of Adam and Eve during the Middle Ages. On the feast day of Adam and Eve, December 24, families would cut down an evergreen tree, bring it into their homes and decorate it with apples to symbolize the Tree of Paradise in the Garden of Eden.

The most popular legend states that the first Christmas tree was cut down by Martin Luther. This religious leader was so touched with the bright stars in the skies one wintry night, that he cut down an evergreen tree and brought it home. He decorated the tree with candles to represent the starry skies of Bethlehem on the holy night of Christmas. Under the tree, Luther placed a nativity scene with figurines of Mary, Joseph, Jesus as well as the animals in the manger.

Whatever its origin, this custom was first popular in Germany, where a Christmas tree is called a *tannenbaum*. German families brought evergreen trees into their homes and decorated them with colored paper, gold foil, fruit, candy, cookies, and apples.

The Germans introduced the Christmas tree into America. German immigrants had Christmas trees, and the German Hessian soldiers that fought in the Revolutionary War also put up Christmas trees.

The festive custom of Christmas trees did not spread quickly throughout America. Very few early American settlers had a German background, and most of American society did not approve of Christmas trees. In fact, in the Puritan-dominated state of Massachusetts, people who put up a Christmas tree were penalized with fines!

The tradition of the Christmas tree is still evolving. Today, artificial trees are in millions of homes. Some of these trees are in colors never imagined by the Germans of old. Whether real or artificial, the celebration of Christmas just wouldn’t be the same without a Christmas tree.

As for other holiday plants, the poinsettia is known in Latin America as the Flower of the Holy Night. Legend states that a poor child, with no gift to offer to the Virgin Mary, humbly picked some weeds along the side of the road.



These weeds were magically transformed into the brilliant red poinsettias we enjoy today.

Evergreen plants have been sacred symbols of everlasting life to many cultures throughout the ages. Mistletoe is an evergreen that has come to symbolize friendship and good health in Scandinavia. In holiday celebrations, a person cannot refuse an offer to be kissed if he or she is standing below the mistletoe.

Holly is another evergreen with special holiday significance. Its very name comes from the word “holy”. Many interesting traditions have developed around holly. For example, if holly leaves have prickly edges, the man should run the household during the upcoming year. If the leaves are smooth-edged, the woman should run the house. Whether prickly or not, hang a sprig of holly on your bedpost and you will always have sweet dreams.

A yule log is a large piece of timber that is decorated with greenery and ribbons, and burned on Christmas Eve. The burning of the yule log is said to draw the family together and the evil spirits away.

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GARDENING TIPS FOR DECEMBER

Trees, shrubs, and lawns

- ❧ Brush snow from drooping shrubs and young trees as soon as possible after a storm. Broom in a gentle, upward, sweeping motion. Serious damage can be caused by heavy snow or ice accumulating on the branches.
- ❧ Panty hose or cloth strips may be wrapped around the stems of multi-stemmed plants such as arborvitae or young birches to protect them from splitting due to snow loads.
- ❧ Be careful when hanging holiday lights on trees and shrubs. Make sure the lights are for “outdoor” use. Loosely attach the lights to the branches and trunks. Remove in spring, being careful not to damage the bark or buds.
- ❧ The ground is frozen now. If you have not done so already, mulch your tender shrubs, perennials, and berries. Choose mulching materials that are “fluffy”, and thus, will insulate plants best. Straw, marsh hay and evergreen boughs are recommended; oak leaves are fairly rigid and will work well, too.
- ❧ Deicing salt can burn lawns. To minimize damage, apply the deicing compounds down the middles of walks and drives, avoiding the edges near the grass. Sand or kitty litter can provide traction and minimize the need for salt. Keep in mind which areas in your landscapes are most often damaged by deicing salts—water these areas in early spring to flush the salts out of the soil. Lastly, consider using deicing salts that are less harmful to plants, such as calcium chloride (instead of sodium chloride).
- ❧ Holly is not hardy in North Dakota, but winterberry is. ‘Red Sprite’ (shown) is an award-winning variety and is highly recommended. It grows 4 feet tall. Plant one companion male (which is fruitless) for every three female bushes. The variety ‘Jim Dandy’ works well.
- ❧ Clip off some branches of colorful shrubs for use as holiday decorations. Red-twig dogwood, yew, arborvitae, juniper and winterberry branches are beautiful in decorations.
- ❧ Living Christmas trees are not recommended in North Dakota. These trees are purchased from a nursery, brought into the house and decorated, and then planted outside after the holidays. Planting a tree in January is extremely harsh on an evergreen and it is not likely to survive.
- ❧ Now is a good time to collect evergreen cones. Cover the cones with peanut butter and then roll them in bird seed. Tie string around the cones and suspend them from tree branches.
- ❧ Now through March is a good time to prune oak and other shade trees. Wound dressings are not needed when pruning.





MORE GARDENING TIPS FOR DECEMBER

Christmas trees

- ☞ There are two ways to select a Christmas tree. First, there is the “Charlie Brown approach”. Look for the saddest tree and give it special love. Second, there is a more scientific approach. Grasp a branch near the trunk and run your hand back towards the tip of the branch; if many needles fall off, the tree is dry. Shake the tree or pound its trunk to the ground a few times; if many needles drop, the tree is dry. Individual needles should bend, not snap. Now that you found a fresh tree, protect it for the way home. Wrap the tree securely in a blanket or tarp to prevent the needles from drying in the wind.
- ☞ Pines naturally hold onto their needles longer than other evergreens. Firs are next, followed by spruces.
- ☞ Save your Christmas cocktails for your guests, not your Christmas tree. You do not need to add 7-Up, sugar, aspirin or any other commercially available additive to the tree water. Just keep the tree stand full of water and the tree will be fine. Once you get the tree home, recut the trunk an inch or more up from the original cut and put it into water as soon as possible, even if you do not plan to put it in the tree stand right away. Set the tree in a cool place, if possible. Check the water level in the tree stand daily.



Christmas carols for houseplants?

Christmas carols bring warmth and joy to our hearts. But do they affect our *plants*? Should we be playing “Jingle Bells” to our poinsettia?

There is no scientific proof that shows that plants like music. It doesn't matter whether the music is rap music or Christmas carols, country music or opera, jazz or easy listening.

On the other hand, I'm not surprised when people tell me that their plants grow well with music in the background. And some gardeners actually sing to their plants.

These musical gardeners may not be as crazy as you

think. Although plants won't sing along, they will respond to the attention you give them. By the way, if my plants could sing, they would sing the blues considering the way I neglect them.

The best gardeners develop a relationship with their plants. They get to know their plants and their special needs. For example, a palm tree prefers a moist soil whereas a cactus will rot if the soil is constantly moist.

Gardeners who sing to their plants will quickly notice when any problem arises. Immediate action taken at that time will help “nip the problem in the bud”, so to speak.



Simply stated, the best treatment to give your houseplants is not a pesticide, fertilizer, or any other chemical. Nor is it “The Greatest Christmas Hits of Alvin and the Chipmunks”. The best treatment for your houseplants is your *attention*.

So turn up the music and give your plants some special attention this Christmas.

Houseplants

- ✎ Florist azaleas are popular holiday plants. Give them a sunny cool location in the home. Apply an acidifying fertilizer, such as Mir-Acid on a regular basis. In early spring, pinch back the new growth to keep the plant bushy. Repot the plant in May and set it outside in partial shade during summer. Before the first frost in fall, bring the plants indoors and keep in a sunny location. You will have beautiful blooms again next winter.
- ✎ The blooms of Christmas cactus are extremely fragile and will drop easily. Keep the plant out of windy drafts. Avoid moving the plant.
- ✎ Norfolk Island pine is a charming, evergreen houseplant. These slow-growing plants are easy to care for indoors, but are not suitable for outdoor planting. They are native to an island in the South Pacific where they grow up to 200 feet tall (shown). Wow!



Vegetables

- ✎ Save holiday wrap cylinders. They can be recycled as collars to protect plants from cutworms next spring. Insert the collars over your transplants, about an inch deep into the ground.
- ✎ Oranges and grapefruits are often packaged in mesh plastic bags. These bags are ideal for drying gourds, bulbs and herbs.
- ✎ Have you ever misplaced a tool in the garden? I misplace my hoe all the time (usually covered by weeds). You can minimize this problem by painting the handles of your tools with a bright color such as red or orange. Or how about using a glow-in-the-dark paint? You can find your tools in the dark!



Foolproof holiday plants (continued from Page 2)

You will see huge blooms in a month! Here's a secret: try to find a huge bulb. Big bulbs send up more than one flower stalk—the plant will bloom for several weeks!

Also, once flower buds appear, move the plant out of direct sunlight—this will prolong the life of the blooms. And don't forget to pluck the anthers out of the blooms; otherwise, the pollen will stain the delicate flower petals.

Paperwhite narcissus is another fun plant to grow. Grow them

in a bed of pebbles in glass containers. A glass container is best since it will let you see the roots grow—cool! Maintain the water level in the container at the base of the bulbs. In about a month you will have fragrant flowers.

The easiest type to grow are the solid white varieties, but they have a unique (a.k.a. nasty) smell. The yellow-centered Chinese sacred lily narcissus (shown at right) smells sweeter.



Christmas traditions (cont. from Page 5)

Rosemary has been used as a holiday plant for centuries. The herb is said to have become fragrant because Mary laid the wrappings of Jesus on it.

Besides these widely held customs, many countries use plants for their own special celebrations:

In Hungary, apples are sliced in half horizontally. If the core of the apple has a star shape, you'll have good luck. Try it yourself (don't worry, almost every apple core has a star shape).

In Norway, stalks of wheat are tied to tree branches on Christmas Eve. If birds are feeding on the wheat while the sun sets, the crops will be good during the upcoming year.

In Spain, children place barley in their shoes to feed the camels of the Wise Men that visit the Twelfth Night after Christmas. In return, the Wise Men will place gifts in the shoes for the sleeping children.

These are just some of the Christmas customs that center around the use of plants. It shows that although people from different nations have different ways of celebrating the holidays, we all share the same desire for peace and joy in our lives. Happy Holidays everyone!

Bluebirds (cont. from Page 3)

bluebird couple make it worth the effort.

Materials: All lumber is standard 1" (actually 3/4" thick) except back, inner top and bottom pieces, which use standard 2" x 4" (actually 1-1/2" x 3-1/2"). Back: 1-1/2" x 3-1/2" x 24"; front: 3/4" x 3-3/8" x 12-1/2"; inner top: 1/2" x 3- 1/2" x 8-3/8"; top: 3/4" x 10 1/4" x 2-3/4 x 17-1/2" x 14-3/8; bottom: 1-1/2 x 3-1/2" x 3"; pegs: 1/4 diam. x 2-1/4 long (1-1/2 projecting inside). Nails: 26 galvanized 1-1/2" long

Use the rough side of lumber for outside. Make two parallel saw cuts 1/8" deep beneath the entry hole for perching. Leave exterior unpainted, or paint with light shades of gray, beige or green. Do not paint interior or entry hole. Use wood stain or latex paint.



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