

Gifts from the garden

Wairarapa Times-Age

19 Dec 2024

Gareth Winter



Left: What says Christmas more than a red and white Amaryllis?

I always think that if you have a gardener in your life, the sometimes onerous task of choosing presents for the festive season is comparatively easy – there are many ways to delight gardeners, from the beginner to the most experienced.

For all types of gardeners, a gift voucher is the most obvious answer. That way the recipient can choose the plant or implement (or even some fertiliser) of their choice – and a visit to the garden centre will quickly show there is no shortage of options.

If you are wanting to encourage a starting gardener, I think a quality garden tool is one of the best things you can give. Nowadays, it is possible to

purchase a wide range of tools comparatively cheaply, but buying a quality example of one of the important tools – spade, fork, pruners – will repay the initial investment.

My shovel is a veritable “Captain Cook’s axe” – it was my grandfather’s shovel and has had a couple of new handles and at least one new head in the years I have had it – the head got so short it needed replacement.

On the other hand, when I began gardening on my own account, more than 50 years ago, I bought an expensive all-steel spade, which I continue to use to this day.

Another obvious choice for a tyro gardener is the Yates Garden Guide. This iconic guide for Antipodean gardens was first published in 1895, so it’s nearly 130 years old, but thanks to many different iterations, and modernisations, it has kept up to date with current garden trends and fads. I think the latest edition was issued in 2021, so it will be of great use to someone just starting on the gardening voyage. I know I have several different editions, and still refer to them when I am stumped with a particular problem.

If garden history is more your go, there’s a very interesting gardening book newly arrived in the bookshops – Clare Gleeson’s wonderful exploration of Alfred Buxton’s gardens, and the women who loved them, called *The Fairer Side of Buxton*.

Alfred Buxton was a landscape designer who worked in New Zealand in the early to mid 20th century, and his gardens are found over most of New Zealand, although he was based in Christchurch.

At one stage, Buxton had an office in Masterton, and he designed several Wairarapa gardens, including a plan for Masterton Park (now known as Queen Elizabeth Park) which was never completely followed, as well as for some farm homesteads in the area.

The book is a great read for anyone interested in garden history, and includes some Wairarapa gardens, including Papatahi and Homewood. I visited Papatahi homestead many years after the garden was at it best, but it was instantly recognisable as a Buxton design by the still-extant pergola and the shape of the gardens.

Another of Buxton’s favourite features were bridges cast in concrete, but made in the Japanese style and formed to look as though they were made of wood. They were a feature of the garden at Purnell, the old Wairarapa College girls’ hostel in Masterton’s Essex St.

Another book idea for the thoughtful gardener might be Beth Chatto's Drought Resistant Planting.

Chatto is a well-regarded English gardener, so the book concentrates on the plants she found doing well on her "gravel garden", which she never irrigated.

Although not designed for New Zealand conditions, there are still plenty of tips that would be useful for someone looking to emulate that style of gardening. With increasing temperatures, and drier summers forecast, it might be one we all need to embrace.

If you are looking to give a plant, there are some obvious choices. The Head Gardener has a potted pōhutukawa that sits on our patio. A gift from her brother, it has managed to survive for the past five years or so, and has even flowered, so your own New Zealand Christmas tree is a possibility, even in the middle of the Wairarapa valley.

Other traditional choices include Christmas lilies, *Lilium regale*. Ours seem to be flowering a little earlier each year (they are in flower already), so I do not know whether we will actually have any for Christmas Day as such, but they certainly make a wonderful show at this time of the year.

For potted plants, poinsettias remain favourites. These are photoperiodic members of the Euphorbia family, traditionally sold at Christmas in the northern hemisphere, as they naturally flower in the middle of winter. In New Zealand, they are manipulated in glasshouses to make them flower in December, so do not expect them to flower at this time next year.

On the other hand, Amaryllis bulbs can easily be timed to flower for Christmas. When they have finished flowering, keep them growing for a few months, then slowly dry them off for a winter break.

Plant them again in early November, and you should have new flowers in time for the festive season.