Valentine’s Day is just around the corner. According to the National Retail Federation, the average couple spent over $133 last year for gifts, dinner and activities related to Valentine’s Day. That is a chunk of change to tell someone you love them when the words are free. I don’t want to be a wet blanket for Valentine’s Day but want to offer some less expensive alternatives.

We all want to be carried away on a romantic vacation, but maybe that is not in the budget right now. How about a “staycation?” Take a look at all the tourist information available from the Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau and see what is available locally. It has a great events schedule at www.explorefairbanks.com. You’ll find some low cost and free events that I know you’ll enjoy. If you want to really win some thanks, book a hotel or a bed and breakfast for this Saturday night. It isn’t tourist season, so that room will come in at an affordable rate. You’ll win major points for thoughtfulness.

It’s the season for chocolate. Homegrown chocolates are much more affordable than that heart-shaped box. But if you have two left thumbs when it comes to the kitchen, here are two quick and easy ideas that will earn you gratitude from the most discerning critic.

Mix up a box of brownie mix from the grocery store. Bake as instructed, but when it comes out of the oven and is slightly warm, use cookie cutters to make heart-shaped brownies. Sprinkle with powdered sugar and you’ve made a dessert to impress. If you are a cookie fan, use a cookie mix and press in a solid layer in the cookie sheet. After baking, cut them with the cookie cutter while still warm. Place a chocolate kiss on top and let it melt. Smooth the “frosting” with a knife.

Candy is dandy for Valentine’s Day. Lay out small pretzels on a baking sheet, then place one Rolo candy on top of each pretzel. Place in a preheated oven (350 degrees) just long enough for it to soften — about 5 minutes. Press in a whole pecan half and let it cool.
Both of these goodies can be placed in a box, a valentine’s sack, or on a thrift store plate for maximum impact.

Every relationship has a history. Think back and relive it. Think about several locations that were important to your relationship and take your sweetie to these locations. Where you went on your first date, where you met, where you first kissed are all locations that are important to your relationship. Now if you are like me and your courtship didn’t take place here, no problem. Take them to a parallel location here in Fairbanks. A great burger joint or maybe star gazing can be repeated, just a little different locale. But be sure to remind your sweetie about your shared history and why you chose this activity. You’ll get major points for remembering and taking a walk down memory lane.

How about establishing your own “date of the month” club? Take 12 envelopes out of the box and take some time to plan 12 very special dates. Label them by the month and put the details of the date inside. January might be a walk in the snow, March a trip to the ice festival and June might be a picnic. Use your imagination and plan ahead. If you want to be a little mysterious, don’t tell them what the dates will be. Simply say “January 12 — dress warm” and surprise your sweetie with the activity and your thoughtfulness. This will also give you an opportunity to save up for those more expensive activities on the list.

The ultimate gift is time together. The last idea is to simply take a day, turn off your cellphone and spend time together. It can be as simple as sharing a cup of coffee or a simple meal. Celebrate your day by reconnecting as a couple and removing yourself from your busy life. This is how relationships get stronger.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is associate director of Cooperative Extension Service, a part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-7201.