



Extension News Column

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It's the holiday shopping season. How are you doing in sticking to a budget? If you are pushing the edges of your budget, think about how to give wonderful presents that take time and effort rather than money.

Who says a gift has to be purchased? Consider alternatives to buying. Consider giving a night's babysitting to the neighbors next door, or taking an older relative on a special trip to the museum or other favorite place. Plan it for well after the holiday season, so you won't be rushed. I had great fun one year picking out fabric from my stash to give to a friend along with the promise of a quilting lesson. We spent a day together sewing in January and she was absolutely thrilled.

Another alternative is to give a family treasure. Think of the keepsakes or family heirlooms you have stored. Give a bowl that belonged to your grandmother, or a book that belonged to someone in the family. These presents have priceless sentiment, and your gift will be far more meaningful than any present you could buy. But be sure to share the story of the item and its owner when you give the gift.

Consider giving the gift of food. For years, the constant gift for my kid's teachers was a Christmas coffee cup filled with peanut butter bon-bons that the kids had made. The cups were picked up either at the thrift store or on the sale rack. We spent a family afternoon making the candy, then packed them in the cups, tied on a ribbon, and we had great presents that the kids had prepared themselves. Consider making cookies, loaf bread (banana or pumpkin are my favorites), a special cake, or a pie. All can be put on a thrift store plate, pan, or in a basket and your gift giving woes are over. I've even made casseroles, soups, or chili, frozen it and given it as Christmas presents. And who wouldn't be glad to have that heat and eat meal in the freezer?

How about making a spice mix to season foods for the year? I've made Italian seasoning, Mexican seasoning, or even a lemon pepper dill. Use fresh spices from the bulk section at the supermarket, place in a pretty jar, and label it with instructions for use. If you need recipes, I have some in my office.

Think about gifts that take time more than money. How about using the computer to write up favorite family recipes, especially those that have come down through the family. Print them out, hole punch them and put them in a notebook. What a great present to have an organized cookbook with all the favorite family recipes!

If you are working on presents with your children, keep in mind their developmental stage so they aren't worn out and testy by the time you are finished. Make working on a gift a time to share and have fun, not a time for you to crack the whip to get everything finished. Stop when you see that they are getting tired. It may take a few nights or days to complete a project.

For children who are out of money for parent presents, consider the gift of your time and energy. I always told my kids at any time in my world, there was probably a dirty car or a dirty refrigerator. I would love for someone to give me the gift of a clean refrigerator.

Think about the things you can do that will save someone else from doing it. Whether it is hauling wood, cleaning the garage, or organizing a closet, all these are welcome gifts for most harried parents.

With a little imagination, you can give the perfect gift at little to no cost.