



A Season of Giving

Holiday giving season is upon us. Somewhat muted this year; it may be that our awareness of the many among us who are struggling just to afford necessities has helped us realize that the path to happiness isn't paved with ribbons and wrapping paper. Curiously, as the desire to receive recedes, the joy of giving is magnified. Or maybe we're just growing up.

Gardeners are generous all year long, not just at holidays. We can't claim to be more unselfish than others, though, because we have a unique advantage: we get to keep our favorites, even as we give them away. We share cuttings, divisions, and seeds, and still the prized plant remains. Sometimes, with a particularly prolific plant, we can't share it fast enough! (I'm looking at you, Missouri sundrops.)

Despite the drought, my dahlias had a banner year. From late summer to frost my family received colorful bouquets, and by October, each of my smitten sisters declared her intention to grow them herself next summer. On Christmas morning they'll each get a box filled with colorful photos of dahlia blossoms. They'll have to wait until spring for the actual tubers, which I dug up last month and packed away to winter over in my basement. My next-door neighbor Gerry and I are also trading: he likes my burgundy "Arabian Nights" and orange-and-yellow "Motto," while I covet a nameless magenta red variety in his garden. And neither of us will be any poorer for the swap: in the course of one summer, little tubers the size of my thumb multiplied to whopping clumps. I'm sure there's a metaphor in there somewhere, about the blessings we share coming back to us manifold. Sentimental, maybe? But, hey, it's the holidays.

Almost any gardener will tell you that her garden is filled with not just plants, but also the memories that arrived with them. The yellow mums I found growing at my first house, descendants of which I've planted everywhere I've lived since. Almost-white daylilies from my friend Ann. Eunice's red cannas, and the black walnuts I picked up in Dorena's yard and am trying to coax into sprouting. Sometimes the memories evoke mixed feelings, as when I shared my cherished blue pumpkin seedlings with my friend Malaine. She—the best vegetable gardener I know—harvested seven fat pumpkins. I, envious, had none. Cuttings from my sister's vibrant purple hydrangea grew, but since my soil's pH doesn't match hers, the flowers are an ordinary blue. My most giggle-provoking plant-sharing memory is of coontie palm at Silver Springs in Florida. This prehistoric plant has fronds apparently made of bright green plastic and a seed cone that looks like a salmon-pink hand grenade. I wanted to see if I could get them to

grow, so a helpful park ranger generously handed me some seeds. When I got home I looked them up, and learned two interesting facts: First, getting coontie to germinate is tricky, requiring long periods of heat and moisture. Second, it is illegal to harvest from the wild. Oops!

Of course, it's the wrong time of year to give away plants from your garden. But it's not too late to pot up divisions of your favorite houseplants, which would be extra-welcome gifts in this winter of homebound isolation. Shared windowsill herbs would be just the thing for pandemic-inspired cooking. Or follow my plan and give photos of summer glories, with promises of the real thing come spring. I promise you, it's extra-special to admire a plant and remember, "My friend gave me that."