

Edition: 01
Date: 08-12-2007
Type: General Consumer
Frequency: 300 Per Year
Circulation: 761637
Page: 55

ArticleId: 10593585



Sow the seeds of imagination

WHEN you are stuck for a Christmas gift, gardening books always come in handy. There are all sorts to suit any reader. You will find books that take newcomers gently by the hand and introduce them to the basics of how to be a gardener.

Then there are the big, well illustrated plant encyclopaedias, photo-filled reference books packed with vital statistics and key cultivation points for most species you are likely to meet.

Specialist books help enthusiasts to top up their knowledge of favourite plant groups, from perennials, alpines and roses to fruit and veg – as good as having your own nurseryman on tap.

Really serious growers will go for monographs, with everything you could ever want to know about a single species – be it fuchsia, saxifrage or apple. And if you are interested in growing for showing, seaside gardening or if you have problem soil such as chalk, limestone or clay, there are some excellent books.

There are seasonal reminders of what to do throughout the gardening year and books to accompany TV gardening series, often with valuable extra information that was not on television because of time constraints. But not all

gardening books are so practical. Volumes of essays, plant hunters' tales and memoirs provide entertaining winter fireside reads and make great travelling companions for long train journeys or brilliant bedtime reading.

So there is lots of choice – and that's just for new books. Many gardening book lovers find old bookshops and secondhand bookstalls quite irresistible.

And wait until you discover the treasure troves online through sites such as www.abebooks.com, where secondhand and antiquarian booksellers combine to list millions of volumes in stock.

You can check the book's condition, description and price before buying online and waiting for your treasure to plop on to the doormat a few days' later.

Old gardening books have enormous charm. Even titles from the Fifties can be fascinating and quite affordable. But Victorian books now attract quite fancy price tags, especially if they are "standard works" and had a limited print run.

Sure, you can tell yourself until you're blue in the face that the information is out of date and the products mentioned have been off the market – if not actually banned – for years. But it's fascinating to discover how things used to be done, whether it's ladies applying canary guano to their house

plants or head gardeners telling you how to force pineapples over steaming pits of manure.

But even facsimile editions reprinted recently can become the collectors' books of the future – when they are limited editions. One thousand numbered hardback copies of Hortus Veitchii have been reprinted to celebrate the centenary of its original publication. It is a remarkable botanical reference work, detailing the 1,500 or so plants introduced by the famous James Veitch and Son nursery in Victorian times, with bags of historical background about plant hunters and hybrids.

YOU can get more details from Caradoc Doy, PO Box 28, Exeter, Devon, EX3 0WY/www.caradocdoy.co.uk. It's just the job for a lover of rare books or anyone wanting to research authentic plants for a period garden.

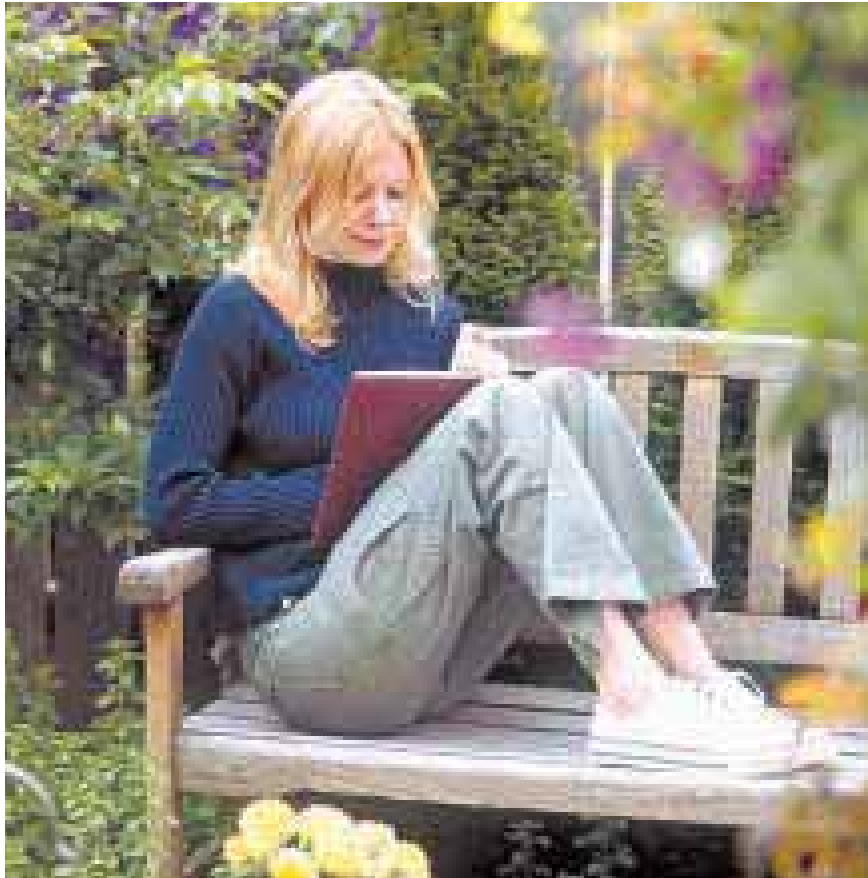
The trick in all cases is to do your homework and find something that really suits the recipient. One thing is for certain: while shopping around, you will find dozens of books that you want yourself.

So note them down, for when you are asked what you really want for Christmas. And never again will you be lumbered with a whodunit when you really pined for a gardening masterclass.

Daily Express Main

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