

December 11, 2021

Good morning

For those who celebrate Christmas it can be a difficult and stressful time when deciding on what gifts to buy for family and friends...usually at the last minute!!

Personally, I believe we spend far too much on unnecessary gifts when the whole exercise can be much simpler and more meaningful.

All we need to do is think about the bounty nature has to offer and it all comes together.

Of course, I am going to concentrate on plants which make wonderful gifts for all occasions.

The edibles are a favourite be it a lemon tree, a selection of herbs, a basket of home grown veg or bottled preserves.

New homeowners appreciate plants as gifts especially trees, if they have the space.

Some time ago I was involved in a city garden where a lot of material had to be removed like overgrown creepers and other invasive material.

In the end not much remained but besides 2 trees there was a plant that really stood out as a shrubby feature in the nearly bare garden!!

It was *Nandina domestica*, often referred to as Sacred Bamboo or Heavenly Bamboo although no relation to real bamboo at all.

This is a fascinating plant big in character from east Asia belongs to the *Berberis* family we used so many of in years gone by but seem to have lost popularity.

No harm in that as many have been replaced with more suitable local flora.

The Sacred Bamboo is just about everything for all gardens.

It has fine fernlike foliage with a unique upright habit and many stems resembling most bamboo's so it can grow in fairly confined spaces and in containers!!

It does sucker when established but easy to control...unlike many of the real bamboos which can get out of hand!!

It can take hot and cold weather, full sun or shade and is tolerant of most soil types.

The terminal sprays of white flowers are followed by bright red berries which last for a long time .

Depending on position they usually get to a height of 2m plus but if that is too tall there are many other cultivars that are more compact.

One of our local plants *Halleria elliptica* is very similar in habit and gets to a height of 1-2m.

When mature it is a waterwise plant but does not like to dry out for extended periods when young!!

An interesting tree in flower at the moment is *Dais cotinifolia* – the Pom Pom tree.

Its natural home is in the eastern, summer rainfall side of the country.

In cold areas they are deciduous but here in the Cape they are semi deciduous towards the end of winter.

They usually grow between 4-6m in height but I have seen them taller.

The flowers usually start in November and go through December so its definitely one of nature's amazing Christmas presents!

A similar tree, often mistaken as a Pom Pom, is the Cape Chesnut *Calodendrum capense*.

Its about the same size in garden environments but in forest conditions it can get up to 15m.

It flowers at virtually the same time as the Pom Pom so another fine example of a good year end reward!!

Its also that time of the year when we chill a bit and find time to live outdoors. Friends of mine who braai just about every day, winter or summer asked me if it was a good idea to put their braai ash in the garden.

Fortunately, they only use wood for braaiing so it was thumbs up.

Wood ash is high in potassium, contains trace elements and essential for good healthy growth... but at the same time it does tend to make your soil more alkaline so perfect for certain plants that want a slightly higher pH.

I had a lemon tree that really needed help and after small applications of wood ash over many months it turned the corner and is now thriving.

You can also sprinkle wood ash lightly on the soil to keep snails at bay or if you prefer, mix it in with your compost heap.

An experienced gardener also suggested spreading wood ash on old lawns especially if they had been over fertilized with nitrates in the past and the soil tended to be rather acidic. Keep in mind that acid soils encourage weeds.

Unfortunately, wood is not always available so we use briquettes which are essentially the same things but they have additives to bind them together and make them burn easily. We cant use them in the soil or on the compost heap so the best alternative is untreated wood or pure untainted charcoal.

So its wood ash only for recycling as a soil or compost additive.

Wishing you all a safe, peaceful and happy experience over this festive period.

That's it for now....next time we chat will be Christmas day....goodbye!.