A GARDENER'S DOZEN: My Favorite Things

Need some gift ideas for your favorite gardener, or maybe some hints about gifts for yourself? These are just the tip of the iceberg of fabulous garden products out there, of course, but it's a starting point for treating yourself or writing your holiday gift list.

As a garden writer, I receive all kinds of products to trial in my own garden, with the hopes that I'll share my thoughts on them and help other gardeners choose products for themselves. With so many items on the market, it can be overwhelming when it comes to spending our precious pennies on them.

Each gardener's situation and preferences are unique, and thankfully, there's something for everyone. When asked which things I like the best, of all that I've tried, these are the ones that made the list:

1. Mud Gloves
To be honest, my very favorite glove of all time was made by Ethel Gloves, but sadly, they are no longer manufactured. Enter the Mud Glove. They've got several different versions, according to need, but the pair I like best is the Cool Mud. It's not a heavy-duty covering for your hands, but for everyday gardening, it has the tactile sense and comfort, not to mention great fit, that you need most often. The nitrile coating on the palms and fingers gives it strength for rough tasks and it's infused with Aloe vera and vitamin E to help keep your hands in good shape. Manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP): $9.95.

If you need a close-fitting rose glove, Bionic has a comfortable leather and fabric version for $49.99.

2. Razor-Back Digging Shovel
This heavy-duty shovel is actually made by Ames Tools for their professional line. It sports a fiberglass handle for strength and substantial "Powersteps," so you can give a leg assist into the heaviest of clay soils. The patented SuperSocket blade attachment adds additional strength for maximum prying power. This is probably the only shovel of this type you'll ever need to buy, because it also comes with a lifetime warranty. MSRP: $39.49.
3. **Hand Pruners**

Again, Ames won the draw for favorite pruners with their Bypass Pruners with Total Control Ring. I’ve tried more pruners than you can imagine, and while many of them work well, these are the ones I reach for most often. I’ve got small hands so I grip some of the other pruners close to the hinge and sometimes it bites. Even though these are designed for medium to large hands, they work fine for my small ones, and the ring helps prevent my hand from slipping around on the handles, so that eliminates the possible pinch. The blades are high-carbon steel capable of pruning up to ¾-inch branches, and they come with a limited lifetime warranty. MSRP: $14.99.

Other pruner favorites are Corona Adjustable Grip Bypass Pruner, Felco No. 6 (for smaller hands), and Florian Ratchet-Cut pruners, which might be the lightest pruners I’ve ever used, but capable of cutting with the best of them.

4. **Garden Hose Reel**

Guess who? That’s right, Ames wins again, for the best hose reel outside of that fabulous pricey automated one that isn’t yet available nationwide (RoboReel, available for $699 in Austin, Texas, area only). The Ames NeverLeak Steel Hideaway model with auto-tracking holds up to 150 feet of ¾-inch hose, works like it’s supposed to with little effort, and looks good doing it. MSRP: $129.99.
5. **Flexzilla Garden Hose**

While we’re talking hoses, I have to rave about the Flexzilla hose I tried in 2014. I thought I’d found my favorite hose until this one came along. Why do I like it so well? It’s lightweight, doesn’t kink under pressure (it really doesn’t), has a swivel grip at each end (helps when coiling it up or moving around while watering), it’s drinking-water safe, and you can leave it out all year round without worrying about it cracking. It’s got a lifetime warranty, and did I mention that it’s lightweight? MSRP: $34.99 for 50 feet; also available in 75- and 100-foot lengths.

6. **Toro Recycler Mower with Smart Stow**

Okay, I’ll admit I’m going mainly on my husband’s recommendation for this one, because he’s the one who takes care of the mowing, but I’ve used it enough myself to concur with his oft-voiced opinion. This is one fabulous push mower. It has a Briggs and Stratton engine that’s easy to start, is self-propelled with variable speed, feels well-built, and it has the bonus of being able to fold up into a vertical position for storing so it doesn’t take up much room. It cuts a 22-inch swath and has 11-inch rear wheels making it easier to use on difficult terrain. MSRP: $369.

7. **PotLifter**

I didn’t take physics in high school, so I can’t give the technical explanation why this device makes something that weighs 10 tons feel like 10 pounds, simply by sharing the load. I just know that it’s a big help to me; well, us, because it does require two people to use it. We’ve got several large, heavy items we have to move from time to time, including my giant agave that isn’t hardy in my Zone 5b garden. The PotLifter is a lifesaver when it comes to taking that big boy in and out of the garage for the winter. It’s adjustable for different-sized items, and easy to clip on and off. It can be used to lift up to 200 pounds and items 30 inches in diameter. Highly recommended if you need to move heavy stuff around. MSRP: $29.95.

8. **Ames Total Control Garden Cart**

In case you haven’t guessed, I’m a big fan of products made by Ames, but when a company has been in business for more years than the United States has been a country (they were founded in 1774), it’s not surprising they get so many things right. This lightweight reinforced poly cart holds 5 cubic feet of material and has 18-inch bicycle-type wheels. There’s less danger of tipping it over than a standard wheelbarrow, and if I had to choose between the two, I’d choose this. I use it a lot. MSRP: $84.97.
9. Cobrahead Weeder and Cultivator

The company lists this as a weeder and cultivator, but that moniker is too limiting for all the things you can do with this. I've never met a single person who has used this tool who doesn't rave about it. It comes in both short- and long-handled versions, and I'd recommend getting both, although the short-handled one gets used the most here. MSRP: $24.95 for the short handle, $59.95 for the long handle.

10. The Backyard Parables: Lessons on Gardening and Life by Margaret Roach
(2013, Grand Central Publishing)

I love this book so much that I recommend it to everyone who asks what my favorite gardening book is, and often to those who don't. It's told in story form, and its layout is just about perfect, adding valuable, pertinent gardening advice among the anecdotes. I've always been a fan of Margaret Roach, a former Martha Stewart employee and "A Way to Garden" blog author, and I told her I don't know how she could possibly write another book as good as this one. I hope she does, but in the meantime, I'll reread this and keep recommending it as the one to buy for yourself and for gifts. List price: $27.
11. Haven Brand Manure Tea

Composted manure is beloved by farmers and gardeners alike for what it does to the soil, improving its texture and adding essential nutrients that plants need. Using it to brew tea for the same purpose is what Haven Brand is all about. Affectionately known as Moo Poo Tea, I’ve used it for years on my houseplants with excellent results. In fact, until I started using it, my orchids had never rebloomed even once. The composted cow and horse manure is packaged in little cloth bags (hand packed by Annie Haven herself) which, when steeped in water, creates the tea for garden and container use. An alfalfa version is available for roses. MSRP: $12.95 for a three-pack, $27.95 for a nine-pack, includes shipping.

12. Liquid Net Bug Repellent

If you had a summer like the one I had this year (so much rain!), a good mosquito repellent was a must when working in the garden. I’ve always detested putting on bug spray, because it usually smells bad and it is greasy. Not this one, which uses the botanical oils of citronella, cedarwood and lemongrass to keep the bugs at bay. In user tests, it worked better than products containing DEET, and it comes with a money-back guarantee. It worked well for me, and that’s saying something, because mosquitoes adore me. MSRP: $15.99 for an 8-ounce spray bottle.

13. The Cinch Plant Hanger

I love the industrial look of this plant hanger from Feeney as well as its minimalist approach; it doesn’t detract from whatever it’s holding. Made from marine-grade stainless steel cable, it’s strong enough to hold 25 pounds and pots up to 12 inches in diameter. MSRP: $9.99.

Kylee Baumle gardens on 1 acre in northwest Ohio, where she puts garden tools through their paces in between writing assignments.

Other Favorite Books

- The Signature of All Things: A Novel by Elizabeth Gilbert (Riverhead Books, 2013) $17, softcover.
- P. Allen Smith’s Seasonal Recipes from the Garden by P. Allen Smith (Clarkson Potter, 2010) $32.50, hardcover.