

Gifts for pets can be the perfect present solution

By SALLY D. KETCHUM
Special to the Record-Eagle

Family, friends, sweethearts and often the boss make our gift lists, yet we sometimes forget our pets and in the case of dogs, the proverbial "man's best friend."

While Christmas is the worst time to actually give pets themselves, shopping for pets is big business. Giving the owner something for his pet is a great idea when you are stumped for ideas. Gift givers can always announce the arrival of a new pet after the excitement wanes by filling a stocking or basket with toys and grooming aids, as well.

The considerations of buying a toy for a pet are the same as buying a toy for a baby or toddler: The toy must be safe, must engage attention and it should not drive the owner crazy, such as a buzzing or squeaky toy.

Gift shops produce ideas that are both sensible and fun. Consider leather leashes (6' is best for training), bright collars, grooming products, brushes, canine nylon dental-care bones, rawhide toys, sturdy plush toys (Beware inferior grade toys containing squeak mechanisms which cats and dogs, especially puppies or kittens, might swallow) and pet beds which come in a huge range of type and price. Gift certificates for kennel stays or obedience classes are sensible, too. Frivolous is fun with jeweled collars, Christmas bows and designer pet sweaters.

The rising popularity of cats prompts new, interesting and healthy options for them. Leo Ruby of Pets & Things in Kalkaska suggests "kitty greens," wheat-type grasses that cats love.

"They're good for them and enjoying the grass is special to them," said Ruby. "Cats especially like to play with fur, so fur mice are good cat toys. Catnip-filled toys and balls with bells inside are other toys that cats love."

Pets & Things also stocks birds and fish — both fresh and salt water.

Another side of pet shopping is shopping for pet owners and

those who love animals, but are for some reason petless. Animal garden sculptures, porcelain figures, coffee mugs, collector plates, rustic plaques, framed photographs and prints, pillows and throws with cats and dogs on them are all welcome because they are not only decorative, but useful items.

Apparel for pet owners offers myriad choices, ranging from T-shirts and caps to lavishly embroidered sweaters and sweatshirts. Such gifts are treasures because they are both thoughtful and show that the wearer is a proud pet owner.

"Unwrapping Christmas," edited by Daniel Miller, looks at gift giving through the eyes of social scientists. They approve pet gifts to owners because, although the item is from a store, it is personalized by the purchaser recognizing the feelings of the recipient. Thinking along these lines, a handmade gift is even more personalized. Bonnie Smith of Yarn Quest in Traverse City said that they offer patterns for pet sweaters in various sizes and styles and yarn in many colors to create them.

Winter is a thoughtful time to remember our feathered friends.

A walk through Judy Barrett-Walters' Wild Birds Unlimited brings to mind not only care and feeding of birds, but downright avian luxury in some cases. The store, in Traverse City for more than 15 years, offers heated bird baths, and also heaters to put into existing birdbaths.

However, gifts for nature lovers need not be limited to birds. Wild birds Unlimited also carries a bungee-jumping squirrel feeder. "They are very

entertaining," says Barrett-Walters, "and totally safe for squirrels."

And bird feeders that are guaranteed squirrel-proof are another popular gift. The store carries a large variety of bird houses, feeders, high quality optical equipment for serious bird watching (a line, exclusively theirs) and gifts that range from the large bird baths to stocking stuffers like seeds for particular species of birds.

Finally, owners like their pets to look their best at Christmas (owners will also tell you that animals know when they look good), so pre-holiday gift grooming might be in order. Most grooming salons have a certified professional on staff, with many options in services offered.

Veterinarians' offices are full of ideas to fill the stocking or basket that says, "Gift pet arriving later." Drs. David Burke and Jerry Harrison of Grand Traverse Veterinary Hospital fill waiting room racks with pamphlets on pet care that youngsters might study to ready themselves for the pet. Besides the all-important, "taking the hassle out of housetraining your puppy," there are booklets on "introducing your puppy

to the world," "preventing and handling aggression in dogs," and "solving chewing and digging problems."

Nancy Langford of Thompsonville, who has worked at an area kennel, says to new pet owners, "I cannot imagine life without a dog as long as I am able to care for one."

And many youngsters "ages 1 to 93," as the song goes, hopefully will feel the same way about their new pet, dog or cat, hamster or lizard — even if it arrives in January.

Sally D. Ketchum is a local freelance writer.

Record-Eagle/Elizabeth Conley

Clockwise from top: A heated bird bath is one gift idea from Traverse City's Wild Birds Unlimited. For the not-so-squirrel-friendly, they offer a variety of bird feeders that squirrels would have a hard time getting into, including this ornate brass feeder. A ground feeder is ideal for those who like to feed all animals, whether feathered or furred.



Holidays and pets

New pets:
■ Giving a pet as a Christmas gift is not a good idea, experts say. Children are often too excited to care for or appreciate the pet; noise and confusion adds to the stress of a new home and the owners.

■ If a pet is to be given as a present, represent it under the tree with a collar, litter box, a book about the animal. Then actually give the pet after the New Year.

For existing pets:
■ Check for possible pet poisons — toxic holiday plants, cleaning supplies and chocolate candy (toxic to dogs) within a pet's reach.

■ Gift wraps can be dangerous — animals can choke on them; some wrappings are toxic.

■ Place decorations with care — dogs and cats might bump into candles, ornaments with harmful results.

■ Be certain to pet-proof your Christmas tree.

■ The bones of holiday feasts are dangerous to dogs.

■ Keep pets on their regular schedules during the holidays — feeding, walking, etc. — to avoid unwanted pet "reminders."

Toys: play it safe

Underwriters Laboratories Inc. has been around for more than 100 years, working to certify the safety of more than 17 billion new products each year.

More than 5,000 engineers and other professionals at UL evaluate products including household appliances, building construction materials, safety devices such as smoke alarms and fire extinguishers and toys. UL has issued these guidelines for toys:

■ Read the manufacturer's warning labels and, if applicable, use and care booklet.

■ Immediately discard plastic packaging.

■ Pay close attention to the recommended age designations marked on the toy.

■ Initially and periodically inspect toys for breaks, ripped seams and sharp edges.

■ Make sure a responsible adult assembles the product according to manufacturer's instructions.

■ Make sure your toy chest is safe and designed with children in mind.

■ Toys designed for outdoor play should be put away after use so they don't become wet, rusty or damaged.

■ Keep deflated and ripped balloons away from children.

■ Be alert and informed about any toy recalls.

■ Don't allow children to use electric toys near water.

Christmas Memories

"My father passed away when I was quite young and my mom raised her five kids with holiday help from her mom. My mother taught at the University of Buffalo and she was always bringing home a visiting professor to share a holiday meal with us. I was about 12 years old at the time. My grandma had been up all night cooking the turkey and preparing the other delicacies that were part of the feast. By mid-morning, the house was filled with the aromas of the feast that would be served around 2 p.m.

We were all gathered at the dinner table, and my oldest brother always sat at the head of the table and carved the turkey. All my siblings were on their best behavior and opposite my brother was a visiting professor from England. As I recall he was a little guy — maybe 5'6" and probably 140 pounds. Michael began carving, all of us were eagerly awaiting a taste of the turkey. He carved half the 25 pound turkey, and put it on a serving plate to pass. When our honored guest received it, he set it down in front of him, cleared the 'empty' plate away, and with a pleasant English accent said, "Please pass the potatoes." Everyone was amazed, even the adults. Us kids, being on our best behavior, said nothing while the professor cleaned his plate. To this day, we still can't believe it that he ate the whole thing, but none of us can recall if he asked for 'seconds'.

Seamus Shinnors, concert promoter

Santa paws

Fido and Fluffy are not immune to stress during the holidays — what with all the unfamiliar houseguests and a big tree appearing out of nowhere in the middle of the living room. So include them on your shopping list with the Good Vibrations Vibrating Pet Massage Brush from Pet Crew. The battery-operated paw-shape massager is intended to calm your pet and relieve tension.

The company claims it can also improve circulation, remove toxins and relieve symptoms of hip dysplasia and other joint problems. And for your comfort, it has an ergonomic vinyl soft-grip top.

Good Vibrations is sold at PetSmart and other pet stores, by phone at 800-381-7179, or on the Web at www.peterew.net for about \$12.95.

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