

Check this list of holiday pet gift ideas

Dear Santa, Well, it's that time of year when everyone starts bugging you about what they want for Christmas.

You must get tired, reading all those letters, doing parades, appearing at malls, and standing in just about every appliance store commercial.

I don't mean to add to your burden. I just want to give you a few thoughts about Christmas and critters, hoping to make things easier for you. I'm writing it here because I know how you never miss my column.

I bet a lot of kids ask you for new pets. What could be more Christmassy than a pup or kitten with a big red bow on his collar running around the tree on Christmas morning?

OK, you're more "Christmassy" but stay with my reasoning. Stress and Christmas go together like fa and la.

Christmas Day makes for a less-than-ideal time for the new addition to the family. Too much stress for the pet, and for the new owners.

Let's face it, Santa, Christmas has evolved into three parts. One: People go to stores and buy gifts. Two:

People open the gifts. Three: People return the gifts to the stores, where I think they're returned to the shelves to wait for next Christmas.

Here's the problem: Critters end up being returned, too. The percentage of Christmas pets that end up in shelters months after the holidays will break your heart.

"Choosing a pet is a personal decision," said Nancy Gunnigle, spokesperson for the Michigan Humane Society. "(It's a) connection that happens between a particular pet and a person... a chemistry."

"We hope it's a bond to last for a lifetime... It's not to be taken lightly."

She suggests that rather than give someone a pet for Christmas, give them a gift certificate saying they will be taken to a shelter to pick out that pet for himself or herself. Wrap up a package of things the pet will need, like food bowls or litter boxes.

This way the excitement of Christmas has its place, and the excitement of picking out the new pet has its own, separate place.

"Be a part of that wonderful moment when they find just the right pet," Gunnigle said.

Now don't take it personally! You do a wonderful job. I just think this is better for the pets, the families, and for you, too! Hey, there's only so much space on that sled, and pet crates get bulky!

GIFT IDEAS

I know a lot of people write letters to you from their pets, asking for gifts. They want cute toys, and treats. Pets playing with new toys certainly can be adorable.

To paraphrase *The X-Files*, Santa: Better gifts are out there. When people ask you for a toy for their cat or maybe even their grandkitty, suggest they spend that money in a way that can help make little Fluffy's life better.

A great idea would be a gift



About Animals
Dr. Brad Davis

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certificate for good pet food at a good pet shop (I emphasize the word "good").

Consider gift certificates to the vet. This is the animal's life at some point - dramatically by paying for an emergency treatment, or quietly by allowing the owner to get an extra vaccine, or keep up with a full year of heartworm preventive.

Veterinary health insurance would also be a great gift. Policies don't cost an arm and a leg, and they help to ho-ho-ho down the cost of vet care!

About the best is Veterinary Pet Insurance, or VPI (call (800) 872-7387). Now that's a gift that keeps on giving, as it gives extra care to the pet and will give the pet's owner peace of mind!

People get charitable this time of year, Santa. If they ask you to suggest a good cause, tell them about the Heifer Project.

I consider the Heifer Project to be one of the wisest charitable organizations ever. It supplies animals and husbandry training to people in poor areas of the world, setting them up so they can start, let's say, a one-cow dairy farm. As their farm grows, they live as a hard-working family, and escape destitute poverty. The Heifer Project doesn't just give a handout, it gives a future.

The Heifer Project truly makes a difference in lives all over the world (like someone else I know, Mr. C.). You should let people know they can call (800) 422-0755 or go to www.heimer.org to learn more.

That's all I have to say, Santa. All I really want for Christmas would be for people to do right by their critters. Maybe make the world a little better - at home by giving smart gifts to their own and other people's pets, and globally through wonderful charity work like the Heifer Project. You don't need to bring me anything.

But that Chicken Dance Elmo looks pretty cool!
Your friend,
Dr. Brad

Dr. Brad Davis is the medical director for the VCA of Garden City, 2085 Inkster Road, Garden City, MI 48135. Feel free to write him there with questions and comments. He is also one of the hosts at the nationally syndicated radio show Animal Talk. Visit the Web site at www.AnimalTalkRadio.com. You can send e-mail questions or comments to DrBrad@AnimalTalkRadio.com.

Kits help you build your own workbench

BY JAMES AND MORRIS CAREY FOR AP WEEKLY FEATURES

Construction in our family goes back several generations. Our great-grandfather was a master plumber; our grandfather and his brother built fishing boats.

Later, as the fishing industry in our area waned, our grandfather decided to take a stab at commercial building construction and later, home building.

With a plumber, a boat builder and a homebuilder, we had an unusual amount of exposure to construction while growing up.

Although our father wasn't a builder he was an avid do-it-yourselfer. Without his interest in woodworking, plumbing, painting and just general tinkering, who knows what field we might have wound up doing for a living?

Our dad's workshop was originally our grandfather's construction company workshop. The top of the workbench frame was fashioned with solid 2-by-12 fir planks. In the mid-60s, our father built a workshop in his auto repair shop. On that one he used a quarter-inch steel plate over 2-by-12 planks and 6-by-6 legs.

To this day we have never figured out why he wanted it to be so strong.

We both have workbenches with built-in vises and use them regularly for every immi-

We know that not everyone has the time, money or tools that it takes to create a fancy workbench like our father's. If that describes you, read on.

nable home-maintenance task. We know that not everyone has the time, money or tools that it takes to create a fancy workbench like our father's. If that describes you, read on.

BUILD A WORKBENCH

With a small list of lumber and a few special connectors, you can build a workbench that will challenge most others for strength, durability and cost-effectiveness.

A bench can be built using a kit that you partially create. An American company that manufactures metal connectors for wood construction offers a bracket kit that comes with steel connectors, screws, a lumber list and assembly instructions.

Since the kit only comes with a list, you have the freedom to select the type of wood you want to use, and buy it separately. Since no miter cuts are

required for the project, you will find that most lumberyards will be happy to cut your lumber exactly to length. You can have it cut to size or cut it yourself.

There is some cutting that must be done. Even if your dimensions of lumber is cut to length, you will have to make a few notches in the plywood countertop and the shelf below it (six locations altogether, each 1-1/2 inches by 3-1/2 inches). With the steel connecting brackets, this job is perfect for assembly with the screws provided.

Although the bench height in the plan is exactly 3 feet from the floor, you can vary from this standard depending on your preference. Remember, this is your workbench.

Changing the height won't cost a cent, and might prove to be a wise decision if your height varies much from average. The lumber list includes a slight amount of extra material.

The depth of the bench is just under 2 feet, and the length is exactly 4 feet. If you build the bench according to the plan's width and depth, the project can be built with a half-sheet of plywood - one-fourth sheet for the bottom shelf and one-fourth sheet for the bench.

Although the plan calls for three-quarter-inch plywood, you can use inch-and-a-half plywood instead, for an ultra-sturdy finished product.

By buying extra brackets, more plywood and a couple of extra 2-by-4s, an additional shelf or two can be added. Or you can forget the extra shelves and use the material to extend the length of the bench. Or you can do both.

If the bench will be used inside, Southern yellow pine or Douglas fir would be the lumber we would choose.

The project should take no more than an afternoon. Gathering material should take longer than the assembly. About the only thing that you could do wrong is to cut the notches in the plywood in the wrong direction; this project really is that easy.

For information on where to get the bench kit, contact Simpson Strong Tie at (800) 599-5099 or through www.strongtie.com.

For more home improvement tips and information, visit our Web site at www.onthehouse.com. Readers can mail questions to: On the House, APNewsFeatures, 50 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020, or e-mail Careybro@onthehouse.com.

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