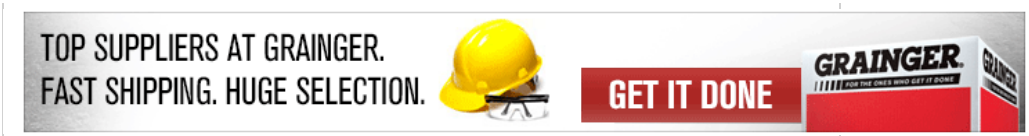

Valentine's Day Gift Giving Guide

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Valentine's Day will forever be associated with the classic gifts of cards, roses, and chocolates. And you can't go wrong with those mainstays. But this year try shaking up convention with some innovative and non-traditional gift-giving ideas for your special someone, even if that someone is yourself. We've gathered several tips on how to make Valentine's Day special for someone else, and for you.

Don't Overdo it

The perfect gift depends most importantly on the status of your particular romantic situation. Lisa Daily, the author of Stop Getting Dumped, says the key in the early day is balance. You want a gift that says, "I was thinking of you, but not obsessing over you." For a just budding relationship (think one to three dates), Daily recommends a gift you might bring a hostess at a party: wine or treats. Try something other than candy: cookies, a favorite snack food, or dinner at a new, unique restaurant.

The longer you've been together by the time Valentine's Day rolls around, the more intimate and expensive a gift can be. At one to two months, feel free to get:

- A simple piece of clothing like a t-shirt
- Entertainment gifts (DVDs, CDs, video games and accessories)

It Really IS the Thought That Counts

If you're in a longer-term relationship, from 6 months to 6-plus years, you probably know enough about the other person to personalize your gift. And let's be honest, unless your paramour is a bona fide flower fiend or candy hound, flowers and candy ain't all that! So show how much you appreciate and care for your significant other. Save the sappy clichés for the card and make the gift really meaningful, says Robin Gorman Newman, author of "How to Marry a Mensch." Get something your sweetie always talks about, but would never buy for him or herself.

If he loves a particular sports team, a jersey with his name on it will be a real winner.
If she's a movie buff, tickets to a film festival or a collection of her favorite movies on DVD can be a good score.
You can also personalize a gift literally by tailor-making it for your sweetie. Several Web sites let you design your own personalized items and they will make it for you. Put her pet name on a t-shirt, or an inside joke on a coffee mug. You can even put a custom message or picture on underwear! You'll both get a kick out of it, and it's something he or she can hold on to for a long time.

In addition to emphasizing your partner's interests, Gorman Newman also thinks the effort and time you put into a gift makes it special. You can:

- Plan a fantasy night at a hotel room, complete with theme decorations,
- Make special crafts
- Create picture albums and collages

These gifts have the added benefit of being inexpensive. Catering to your love's special interests or giving something that promotes you being together will mean much more than three dozen red roses or expensive jewelry. Though that's no knock against a diamond necklace, which can indeed be the way to her heart (hint, hint!).

Make It Sensual

Valentine's Day isn't only for thoughtful and romantic gifts. A sensual gift can be just as memorable, says dating expert and author April Masini.

- Give your mate a massage (more than just a shoulder rub), complete with oils, scents, and mood lighting.
- Try cooking an intimate dinner for your loved one. Take care of everything: food, lights, and music.
- Make some gift certificates for your partner to redeem at home. Use your imagination for the gifts they offer.

Going Solo

But what if you're single? Don't wallow in loneliness. Turn your jaded view of Black Hearts' Day into a special pampering occasion. Everyone knows that Valentine's Day was invented by card companies to sell more cards. Take the opportunity to add to the economic boost, in your own fashion.

- Take yourself out to a play or movie.
- Buy that gadget you've been wanting.
- Treat yourself to a spa or sporting event
- Go get that new bracelet or sweater you've had your eye on