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Deborah Rhoades, M.A., R.D.

Extension Educator, Family & Consumer Sciences

Theme Gift Baskets for Holiday Giving

Tis the season for giving and you are making a list and checking it twice. Whether the list is long or short, likely there is someone, who you just do not know what to get. Perhaps they have everything they want or need and another object is just one more thing to clean and take care of.

This year consider a creative gift basket with a food theme. All items don't have to be food, but if you have a theme to plan and shop around, it makes it easier to generate ideas. We have included recipes for each theme and product information on where to purchase many of the items. Get your children involved in the preparation and make it a gift from the entire family. Have them make gift cards out of heavy construction board or poster board and decorate themselves. Place items in a decorative container or basket with beautiful ribbons.

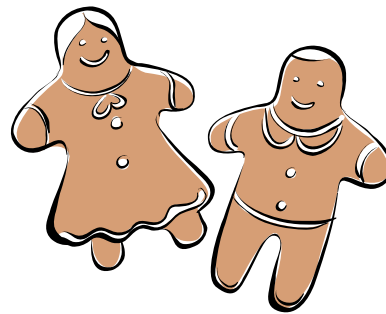
Ideas for basket themes and gift items:

GINGERBREAD theme

- Gingerbread bath salts (see recipe). Make a gift tag in the shape of a gingerbread man with the message, "Sprinkle in as fast as you can! Bath salts from the Gingerbread Man!"
- Gingerbread with Lemon Sauce loaf (see recipe)
- Gingerbread cookie cutters
- A copy of the famous book, *The Gingerbread Man*, for the children in the family
- For the extravagant giver you can order a personalized gingerbread house from Williams-Sonoma. The house is completely edible and comes personalized with a family name over the door. Cost is \$56.95, order at www.williams-sonoma.com

GINGERBREAD BATH SALTS

- 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 (1 pound) box of baking soda



Mix ingredients together thoroughly; then place in a resealable plastic bag. (Small scoop in a tub of water.)

GINGERBREAD WITH LEMON SAUCE

Vegetable Cooking spray

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

1/4 cup sugar

3/4 teaspoon ground ginger

3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon baking powder

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1/2 cup water

1/2 cup molasses

1/4 cup margarine, softened

2 egg whites

Spray an 8x8x2-inch baking pan with cooking spray and dust lightly with flour. Set pan aside. In a large mixing bowl, combine flour, sugar, ginger, cinnamon, baking powder, and baking soda. Add water, molasses, margarine and egg whites. Beat with an electric mixer on low to medium speed till combined. Beat on high speed for 2 minutes. Pour into prepared pan.

Bake at 350° about 30 minutes or till a wooden toothpick inserted near the center comes out clean. Cool in the pan on a rack for 10 minutes. Remove cake from pan and serve warm with lemon sauce.

Lemon Sauce:

1/3 cup sugar

1 tablespoon cornstarch

Dash ground nutmeg

3/4 cup water

1/2 teaspoon lemon peel, finely shredded

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1 teaspoon margarine

1 drop yellow food coloring, if desired

In a small saucepan, mix sugar, cornstarch, and nutmeg. Stir in water. Cook and stir over medium heat until mixture is thick and bubbly. Cook and stir for 2 minutes more. Stir in lemon peel, lemon juice, margarine, and food coloring (optional). Serve warm over cake. Makes about 1 cup sauce.

PEPPERMINT theme

- Peppermint Hot Chocolate mix (see recipe)
- Peppermint Soap – one of my favorites is made by Fernwood Soaps in Grantsville, MD. To order www.fernwoodgallery.com.
- Crème de mint liquor or peppermint schnapps
- Peppermint brownies (see recipe)
- Peppermint candle. Yankee candle makes two –Cranberry Peppermint, and Peppermint Swirl, order from www.yankeecandle.com.
- Mint foot scrub or lotion to tickle their toes. A favorite is Dr Scholl's Pedicure Essentials Cooling Peppermint Foot and Leg Lotion.

Make an attractive gift tag shaped like a candy cane with the saying "You're a Mint!" or Christian families can include "The Legend of the Candy Cane," message. According to the legend there was a candy cane maker who wanted to invent a candy that was a witness to Christ. You can access a copy of the message at <http://www.christmaswithlove.com/candycane.html> I'm sure if you have access to the internet you can get various themed gift ideas that you can make yourself and find stories behind the legends of almost any holiday!

PEPPERMINT HOT CHOCOLATE MIX

2 tablespoons powdered instant dry milk
2 tablespoon powdered coffee creamer
1 tablespoon sugar
1 tablespoon unsweetened cocoa
1 peppermint candy, crushed into fine pieces

Combine all ingredients and stir until well blended. Place in a 3"x4" ziplock bag and seal. Attach a gift tag with the directions on how to prepare the hot chocolate.

GIFT TAG:

To make one 6 ounce serving:
2 tablespoons Peppermint Hot Chocolate Mix
6 ounces (3/4 cup) boiling water
Whipped cream and candy cane, optional

Place the mix in a mug. Pour boiling water over the mixture. Stir until the mix is completely dissolved. If desired, garnish with whipped cream and candy cane. Package of Peppermint Hot Chocolate Mix makes 3 to 4 servings.

PEPPERMINT STICK BROWNIES

4 eggs
2 cups sugar
1 cup cocoa
1 cup flour
1 teaspoon peppermint extract
2 sticks melted margarine



Beat eggs with sugar until thick. Add cocoa, flour. Add 1 teaspoon peppermint extract and 2 sticks melted margarine. Pour into greased jellyroll (11 x 17) pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 12 to 15 minutes. Don not over bake. Cool and frost:

Frosting

Beat 1 package powdered sugar and 1 stick margarine til creamy. Add peppermint extract and enough milk to make thick icing. Color green. Spread over brownies. Put in freezer to "set" for 10-15 minutes before coating.

Coating

2 squares bitter chocolate
2-3 tablespoon. margarine

Melt squares chocolate and margarine in shallow pan. Brush over frosted brownies with pastry brush. Place in refrigerator or freezer to harden before cutting into fingers.

Deborah Rhoades, MA, RD, LDN, is a licensed Registered Dietitian and Extension Educator in Family and Consumer Sciences. For more information about the Frederick County Extension Office check out our website <http://Frederick.umd.edu> (Please change website in newspaper.)

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