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You'll Like the Tenancies bill and Poppintree Build, but not a lot

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JANE POWERS
GARDENS


Ignore the gimmicks on the shelves and wrap up something pretty or practical to keep the gardener in your life happy this Christmas

If you know a gardener and are wondering what to give them for Christmas, then let me help you. An important thing to keep in mind is that much of gardening is simply manual labour, and for that we gardeners like robust, ergonomic tools and useful paraphernalia. Therefore, at the risk of seeming grumpy, let me advise you to ignore novel, cute or funny items, and to concentrate on truly useful, beautiful or productive offerings.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Let's talk about tools first. There are plenty of excellent implements out there: look for those with rust-proof parts and sturdy construction. Wooden handles feel pleasant and age gracefully. My favourite hand tools are the copper range made by PKS (from thetoolforge.ie) – they cost from €30 for the covetable Nunki hand weeder (1) to €45.01 for a five-tine cultivator; trowels and hand forks are €35.40 each.

DeWit tools (Howbert & Mays, Monkstown, Co Dublin; howbertandmays.ie) are forged from carbon steel and have ash handles (2). The range includes a tool for everything, including a patio knife (€12.95), dandelion weeder (€22.95), bill hook (€32.95), and a transplanting trowel (€14.95).

Veg gardeners and others who like to weed while standing up will thank you for the self-sharpening oscillating Stirrup Or hoe (3), which slices through weeds on both forward and backward passes (€37.50, quickcrop.ie).

Southpaw gardeners who are fed up with holding their secateurs upside down will be happy to receive a Felco left-hand pruner No10 with a rotating handle (€79.95, mrmiddleton.com). The Felco pruner No9 (€64.95) is also a left-handed model, but the handle does not rotate. The Japanese company Niwaki makes elegant, hand-forged tools, including left-handed pruners (€90.06, niwaki.com).

Gardening gloves are always welcome, as most dedicated plants people go through several pairs a year. Showa Floreo 370s are best for fine work and are widely available, from about €7.50. For those with roses and other thorny plants, leather pruning gauntlets protect hands and wrists from scrapes (from €17.50, amazon.co.uk).

WHEN THEY HAVE IT ALL

For the gardener who has everything, why not try a gift with a customised inscription? Plantabox's pine trug (4) comes with your choice of wording, in up to 24 characters, and is available in 10 colours, including pink, green and antique oak (€43.14, notonthehighstreet.com). Or, how about a personalised enamel bucket (€41.94, notonthehighstreet.com) from Jonny's Sister (5)?



EARTHY PLEASURES



The wollemi pine (*Wollemia nobilis*) was known only as a fossil until a small plantation was discovered in 1994 in New South Wales. Royalties on sales of the seedlings go towards plant conservation. The 30cm-tall wollemi babies, which are suitable for growing in pots or in the garden, cost €85 at Johnstown Garden Centre in Naas (johnstowngardencentre.ie).

Also here is the Black Baccara rose (€9.95), previously available only as cut stems in the floristry trade. If there is a flower arranger in your life, they'll be thrilled to receive their own plant (€18, mrmiddleton.com).

The gift packs from Brown Envelope Seeds contain organic vegetable seeds raised in west Cork. There are several to choose from, including the light-hearted "accountant's gift box" (6) with "three kinds of beans for them to count over the holiday period" (€9.99, brownenvelope-seeds.com).

FOR SMALL SPACES

For apartment-dwelling gardeners, houseplants will keep their green fingers busy. You can find wide ranges at Howbert & Mays; Avoca in Kilmacanogue; and Urban Plant Life on Cork Street in Dublin 8 (plantlife.ie). Prices start at about €4 for an air plant or succulent.

Cachepots are decorative containers into which you slide a utilitarian plant pot. They have no drainage holes, so protect furniture from water stains. I love the Des Pots range at Howbert & Mays: small, sea-green cachepots tastefully embossed with fern pattern (€5 and €10).

The Irish Design Shop in Drury Street, Dublin 2, stocks cylindrical ceramic pots and saucers in warm terracotta with a cream glaze, handmade by Helen Faulkner (€45 to €52, irishdesignshop.com) (7). If you're near Enniscorthy, pop into Kiltrea Bridge Pottery for hand-thrown planters and pots, from €10 (kiltreapottery.com).

Forgetful gardeners or those who are often away could do with a self-watering pot. Ikea's range includes the large (32cm) polypropylene Ikea PS Fejö with castors for easy moving (€20); the two-tier earthenware Söticitron (€8 and €12) (8); and the circular, terracotta Användbar (€17).

SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP

Why not give the gift of an annual membership to a society of like-minded people such as the grow-it-yourself organisation GIY (€35, shop.giyinternational.org); Irish Garden Plant Society (€30, irishgardenplantsociety.com); the Organic Centre (€40, theorganiccentre.ie); or the Royal Horticultural Society of Ireland (€50, rhsi.ie).

GIFT VOUCHERS

If you're still uncertain what present to give this Christmas, just get your loved one a gift voucher from their favourite shop – and watch their smile blossom.

SPONSORSHIP

Consider sponsoring a tree in the new Giants Grove at Birr Castle in Co Offaly (giantsgrove.ie). In a joint venture, Crann and Birr Castle are planting 2,000 giant and coastal redwoods (*Sequoiadendron giganteum* and *Sequoia sempervirens*) to make the largest giant redwood forest outside California. You can sponsor a tree for €500.

BEYOND GARDENING

All gardeners are amateur meteorologists and will appreciate the Oregon Scientific wireless weather station, which shows indoor and outdoor temperature and

humidity, barometric pressure, time and moon phase (€89.99, argos.ie) (9).

Is your plant-lover forever uploading pictures to Instagram? Then present him or her with a clip-on, three-in-one universal smartphone camera set with fisheye, macro and wide lenses (€15, thegadgetstore.ie).

It's a rare gardener who is not a bird lover; there are gifts in plenty at BirdWatch Ireland's shop, in Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, and online (birdwatchireland.ie). A nestbox kit is €10, while ready-made boxes cost from €20. Feeders start at €4 and €5, while a squirrel-proof feeder is €22.

Mail order prices do not include delivery charges

You'll like the tenancies bill and Poppintree build, but not a lot

Two things exercised my brain this week, both of which reminded me of a late, lamented magician.

The first is the government's Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Bill 2016. This is the bill that will send planning applications for 100 or more residential homes directly to An Bord Pleanála.

As I have said before, this will not be the panacea for a perceived problem, mostly because the problem does not exist. In 2015, 985 appeals in relation to residential developments were made to An Bord Pleanála, and about 75% of judgments confirmed the local authority's decision. Indeed, 82% of all priority appeals to An Bord Pleanála were "disposed of" within 18 weeks.

The bill is also democratically deficient (councillors seem quiet on this) and paves the way for more centralisation of powers that should be exercised at local authority level.

As well as housing schemes,

this bill also deals with the eviction of tenants if landlords put their properties up for sale.

The protection offered is restricted to tenants of landlords with 20 or more tenancies who propose to sell these properties at the same time, in the same development. This represents 0.54% of all landlords in Ireland. Technically, it also covers about 15.5% of all tenancies, but the number of landlords with 20 or

more tenancies in the same property, as covered in the proposed legislation, will be nowhere near that figure.

The devil is in the detail, and other provisions in the bill give essentially unenforceable exemptions to this protection, meaning that any landlord worth their salt could easily drive a coach and four through the legislation.

For example, one exemption is

if the landlord can prove that the price they would receive for their property will be more than 20% below what they might expect to receive if it were sold with vacant possession. The other exemption is if they claim that selling their properties with the tenants still present would be unduly onerous, cause undue hardship or be unduly unfair. Imagine if these principles were applied to rent.

There should be awards for proposed legislation that says so much but means so little. And this is where the magic happens, as this bill is straight out of the Paul Daniels School of Policy-making. The headline promises a grand spectacle (protecting tenants in their homes); the show will no doubt be impressive (press releases, interviews, and so on); and the velvet curtain is pulled back (ta-dah!) to reveal all. Pretty soon it is disappointingly obvious that there was nothing of substance present, however.

Like a magic show, this bill is smoke and mirrors – an illusion of doing something, but in reality



The government's latest housing bill resembles a magician's trick

doing nothing more than insulting the intelligence of those who rent.

Hints of Paul Daniels were also evident last week in Dublin city council's capital programme for 2017-19. In the section on planned expenditure, under modular homes, at the now

infamous Poppintree site, is a sum of €250,000. There is no indication of what this sum is allocated for, but it is not that long ago that the council claimed the 22 modular houses were built for €180,000 each. Remember these modular homes that became "rapid build"? They were

neither rapid nor modular, and at 92 sq metres were below Dublin city council's own minimum size requirements for a three-bedroom terraced home.

The breakdown of the final cost per house was not given – for example, it is assumed that it excluded site costs. But now, there is an extra €250,000 (or €11,363 per house) in the programme. The €180,000 figure seems to have risen to €191,363.

The rest of the planned expenditure on modular housing ("rapid housing" seems to have disappeared, once more) indicates the delivery of 153 houses for €37.1m, or about €242,000 each. This is a big change from the initial mooted sum of about €100,000 per modular home.

Earlier this year, we had Sherlock Holmes's nemesis, Moriarty, wandering round the corridors of power causing chaos. Now we have the ghost of Paul Daniels creating illusions of progress, but with everybody knowing that really it is just a bit of a con.

LORCAN SIRR
ON THE HOME FRONT
