

Young astronomer gift tips

By Vernon Whetstone

Amateur Astronomer

Well, it's close enough to Thanksgiving, I think we can safely start talking about Christmas.

If you have a young astronomer, or even an old astronomer, on your Christmas list, the question arises, just what should you get them as a Christmas gift?

Let's start with the young astronomer. For someone who is not well acquainted with the sky I would recommend a star atlas, or a planisphere. A planisphere is a star chart with an oval hole in the front and a dial around the edges with the date and time marked.

The user can set the outer circle with the current date and time and the current night sky will be shown in the oval. It is very useful in locating constellations and bright stars and—depending on the quality of the device—astronomical objects.

Planispheres can be found at most astronomical supply places, or some very nice ones can be found on Amazon (www.amazon.com). Amazon is also a good source for books about astronomy, star charts, and other supplies. I would recommend you get a planisphere that will show whatever particular latitude you live on, or close to.

For the residents in southwest Nebraska and northwest Kansas, that would be the 40 degrees north.

The best thing for the young astronomer is to learn the night sky, then proceed to discussion of the purchase of a telescope.

As such, for the younger astronomer I would not recommend a telescope, at least not right off the bat. I would recommend a really good pair of binoculars. With binoculars our budding astronomer can see a lot of things and won't need to be lugging a lot of equipment into the field to do it.

You can get a pair at any big-box, or sporting goods store, or there are many good astronomy supply places online. Places like: telescopes.com; meade.com or celestron.com, or even back to good old Amazon.

Now, a word of warning about binoculars. First, if you have a pair in your hands, hold them up and look through the big end. If the hole you see is not round, give them a pass.

Second, if looking for binoculars, buy a pair to fit the size of the person. An eight-year old will have a hard time holding a huge pair of 10x50 binoculars, whereas an adult would have no problem.

Now that we have our young astronomer outfitted with a planisphere, or star chart and is sitting out in the field under the dark sky, what should we look at. The biggest problem with beginning astronomers is, they don't know.

Back to our friends at Amazon. Search for "astronomy books for kids," and a nice selection will show up. Some even have a built-in planisphere. There are even books listing binocular objects for the young astronomer to find.

Next week we will discuss the older astronomer.

SKY WATCH: Third quarter moon, Monday, Nov. 25, new moon, Monday, Dec. 2.

Thanksgiving Day, Comet ISON makes a very close pass around the Sun. We will all be waiting with baited breath to see if it survives the trip and returns to our morning skies. Speaking of morning skies, Friday morning, Nov. 29, a very slender crescent moon will be very close to the bright star Spica about an hour before local sunrise. Sunday morning, Dec. 1, that same, only more slender, moon will pass between the planets Saturn and Mercury. Saturn will be the bright dot on the top.

NEXT WEEK: Gift ideas for the more experienced astronomer, and more astronomical blathering.