



VALENTINE'S DAY

Starting the Morning Off Right

What better way to begin Valentine's Day than with breakfast in bed?

You'll have to get up early, and be careful not to wake them.

But the rewards for your stealthy surprise will go beyond doing something nice for your significant other. Breakfast is too often wrongly overlooked in our busy lives, when instead it's of critical nutritional importance.

So offer your partner or spouse a moment of tasty luxury, as they get a chance to relax and enjoy your company before getting on with the day.

GOOD IMPRESSION

So you've gotten up early, created just the right menu and completed the preparations without burning anything. Next focus on presentation, which can sometimes be underestimated. Purchase Valentine's Day-themed decorative items to really jazz up things. You may also add attractive herbs as a garnish, if that won't negatively impact the flavor profile. If you're serving French toast or pancakes, consider a light dusting of powdered sugar. It tastes as great as it looks. Pair it all with a personal gift to complete your surprise. This can be a handmade item or a small piece of jewelry – but shouldn't represent the main gift. It's simply supposed to function as a preview for what's to come



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on their special day.

HEALTHY OPTIONS

Breakfast is actually the most important meal of your day, according to an overwhelming number of medical professionals. These early meals help jump start your metabolism, setting a calorie-burning standard for the

rest of the day. Studies also show that breakfast can help with concentration and creativity in the hours that follow. Just make sure to create a meal that focuses on high-nutrient, high-quality foods like egg whites, fruit, lean meats and granola. Avocado toast has become a trendy breakfast choice for a reason. It's easy to

prepare and provides lots of essentials to get your Valentine's Day day off to a great start.

'BERRY' SPECIAL

Think of berries as your secret Valentine's Day weapon. Whether used as a theme or just to add a splash of color and taste, berries can take your

breakfast up a notch. Freeze strawberries or raspberries inside ice cubes, or use them to make fruit smoothies or a morning cocktail. Cook them into muffins, pancakes or cinnamon rolls. You can garnish almost any drink with berries, but they're especially attractive on a plate: Cut them in half, and they look like tiny hearts.

Ready To Pop the Question?

The day is often filled with grand gestures, but none bigger than this

Plan ahead if you're hoping to turn the most romantic holiday of the year into an unforgettable moment.

After all, it may be harder to surprise someone if the proposal is in any way expected. There's a built-in risk that this special moment may get ruined by someone who figures out what you've been planning.

Add a layer of mystery, while also making sure that the time and place is just right.

TAKE IT EASY

There's something to be said for a well-executed proposal, even if it just means surprising her by arriving to pop the question well before your scheduled reservation time. But be aware that going over-the-top may take some of the luster away from the moment. Consider the life that you share right now before hiring a sky writer or a mariachi band. Quieter types might better appreciate returning to the scene of your first date, or to a place that defined your relationship in some meaningful way. If you're unsure, drop a few hints to find out more.

CAPTURE EVERYTHING

You'll want to document your big day, so hire a photographer early into your plan-



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ning process. They're not always easy to schedule. As you're discussing the shoot, remember that they may be the hardest thing to keep secret in the moment. They'll more easily blend in with a public proposal, but discuss how the photographer plans to conceal themselves if you're

staging something more personal like a long walk on the beach. If all else fails, consider having a trusted friend on hand to capture the moment.

DON'T DO THIS

Don't hide the ring in a completely ridiculous spot. You can lose it in a cham-

pagne glass, box of chocolates or in a cupcake – and in the most dangerous of ways, should they accidentally gulp it down. Don't set unrealistic expectations: People respond to big surprises in their own special ways. That might mean crying, screaming, cursing, even laughing. None of

these reactions means they're saying no, only that they were caught off guard – and that was really the point of this whole thing, right? Don't sweat the small stuff. If a curious dog ruins your perfect picnic, it simply becomes another chapter in the story of your love.

Valentine's Day On A Budget

Money may be tight, but that's no reason to scrimp on romance

You'll have to be a little more creative, and perhaps a bit more flexible too.

Make it a rare night where you both dress up. Grab some candles to add romance and a touch of mystery to dinner, then exchange handmade gifts.

Dig a little, and you might find a cost-conscious place off the beaten path to spend your special evening. Or maybe the day is best concluded with time spent outside under the stars.

The best part about all of these ideas is that they come from the heart — and that's what this day is really all about.

STAYING HOME

Dinner in doesn't have to be boring. Find music that recalls a special moment in time, while collecting special mementos for use in decorating the table. Preparing the meal together might make for a fun change of pace. If you're not in the mood to cook, or just not that great at it, order some affordable takeout but then serve it on your nicest plates.

Create a romantic dessert with decorated cupcakes or cookies. Even something more simple like strawberries dipped in chocolate makes for a special moment. After din-



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ner, have a favorite movie queued up, binge-watch a show you both love, or consider creating new memories with a living-room dance or two. Puzzles and games might also add some laughter to the day.

GETTING THERE

Whether you set up a comfy

picnic, strike out on a long hike, watch a slow sunset, or climb aboard a kayak or bicycle, being in the great outdoors can bring your love into focus. In some cases, your choices may be defined by work schedules or other responsibilities, but even a quick visit with Mother Nature provides a beautiful setting.

Just be sure to match any activity with your partner's abilities, so you can participate together.

ON A BUDGET

The fanciest restaurants will often have glitzy Valentine's Day-themed dinners, with prices to match. But there are likely more budget-friendly

options for those who would still prefer to let someone else do the cooking. Seek out a previously undiscovered locally run "mom-and-pop" restaurant where you'll likely find cheaper meals and a more intimate atmosphere. If all else fails, consider celebrating on a different night — when prices return to normal.

Try Something Different

There are a number of unusual ideas that add spice to Valentine's Day

Flowers and candlelit dinners have been done. Ready to branch out?

You could learn something, give back to your community, live a little or recreate a key moment. Whatever offbeat activity you choose, it'll make for a memorable evening that is anything but the same old thing.

RECREATE THE PAST

Valentine's Day is the perfect time for a nostalgic return to your first date. Whether it took place recently or decades ago, nothing puts your love in perspective like going back to the restaurant or seeing the film that initially brought you together. It may be easier to stream that first movie than getting back to the restaurant, since it may have closed or you may have moved. If so, consider cooking the same meal at home. Then you can recreate your first dance too.

LIVE IT UP

Tonight is the night to book that special suite at the ritzy downtown hotel you've always dreamed of staying in. Or swap out your car for a luxury rental. Even a brief test drive brings an aura of glamour and fun to the day. Bring an extra layer or two and put the top down. If that five-star restau-



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rant is simply out of your price range, time your visit when there may be early-bird or happy-hour specials. If cost is no option, go all out with a limo and champagne.

GIVE BACK

Projects done together tend to bring people closer, and

there's nothing more rewarding than giving back to those in need. Volunteer at the local soup kitchen, food bank, animal shelter or local charity. Even a smaller effort, like checking in on a neighbor before your big date, could make all of the difference in the world. After all, many of

those who are less fortunate may be spending their Valentine's Day alone. A warm conversation could provide a huge pick me up.

LEARNING TOGETHER

Consider taking a tandem cooking, art or wine-tasting class. You'll be learning some-

thing together, and will leave having shared a special meal, painting project or tasty libation. Some restaurants sponsor these special events. You can also check local listings for community centers, churches and arts-and-crafts stores for other interesting events.

A Living Testament

Bouquets unfortunately fade away, while plants can last a lifetime

Some flowers may return year after year, while other greenery boasts important health benefits.

Some plants relieve allergies, improve air quality and boost your mood. The act of caring for them may actually have the same health advantages as exercising.

Here are some great live plant gift ideas for your Valentine.

ROSES

Local plant stores and home-improvement outlets typically offer a wide variety of rose choices to suit any preference — and they'll provide blooms for years to come. Beyond colors and sizes, there are a number of varieties that do well in different environments. (Miniature varieties can even be grown indoors.) Whether they continue to live inside, as a shrub or climbing a trellis, these roses will endure as a symbol of your love.

SPECIAL PLANTS

What better planting than one that's actually shaped like a heart? Of course, the typical Philodendron has heart-shaped leaves, in a remarkable range of green colors. Hoya Kerrii is also a variety of succulent vine plant with fragrant flowers and heart-shaped leaves. Anthuriums have both



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heart-shaped flowers and leaves — a holiday-appropriate bonus! The hemionitis arrifolia is likewise known as the “heart fern.” Consult a local nursery to find out which is best for your particular environment.

ORCHIDS

Yes, orchids. You may have

heard they're hard to grow, but with some 20,000 species there is a member of this diverse family that will thrive for you and your partner. They also are typically associated with a white bloom, but actually come in a broad spectrum of colors. And their longevity makes the orchid a powerful symbol of your love.

TREES

When wisely chosen, trees will last for generations. You just have to make sure the particular tree you intend to plant does well in your growing zone. Look up your locality on the USDA zone map to learn more about what to plant. Experts from the plant store or local extension service can

also provide additional tips about the right depth and amount of water needed for trees to establish and flourish. Planting too deeply or providing the wrong amount of water are among the most common issues. The Arbor Day Foundation and National Forest Foundation are also helpful resources.

If You're Single

Being alone on this special day doesn't mean you can't have fun

Plan ahead to make sure that it doesn't turn into just another night in mid-February.

Sure, Valentine's Day can serve as a painful reminder that you're not in a relationship, or that one has just ended. Still, there are ways to make the most of the day, even for those who are still looking to date or get married.

HAVE A PARTY

Get together with other single friends for an un-Valentine's Day party, with drinks, food, games. Make it even more fun by only allowing your guest's plus-one to be a furry friend. Ready to take it up a notch? Go all out by decorating the space with black accessories and broken hearts.

GO AHEAD AND BINGE

On TV or movies, that is. It's never been easier to curl up on the couch and watch your favorite series or sequel after sequel after sequel. If you're in a darkly humorous mood about it all, choose a comedy that fits that tone. If you're simply feeling dark, watch a police procedural or a scream flick. Skip past the cheesy romantic movies to find action or old westerns. Or go all in on a celebrity crush and watch everything they ever starred in.

MAKE A MEAL

Fancy three-course meals aren't just for those with a partner. Dig into the kind of cooking you never seem to have the time or energy for, like steaks, lobster or tasty homemade desserts. Use your best plates and silverware, and drink from your grand-

mother's best crystal. If cooking just isn't your thing, order through a delivery app or get some takeout from a favorite local place.

TREAT YOURSELF

Presents aren't reserved for others, either. Is there a piece of jewelry you've been eyeing?

A cool clothing item, new book or home accessory? Treat yourself to an indulgence, even if it just a box of special chocolates. Have some flowers delivered, too. Why not?

IGNORE IT ALL

There isn't a rule saying you can't ignore social media, cer-

tain cable channels and store displays for 24 hours. Focus on every-day activities like work, exercise and recreation that provide healthy distractions. Reach out to someone you haven't spoken to in some time, whether they are friends, family or simply an old acquaintance.



Make Your Own Special Gift

Doing something yourself can be more touching than a pricey purchase

Whether it's restoring a found item, crafting an entirely new gift or up-cycling around the house, you're giving from the heart.

The problem is often that there is such a wide variety of possibilities that it can be difficult to get started. In a typical store setting, the options are laid out in an orderly fashion. You can choose based on availability, price or both — and gift-wrapping is sometimes included.

The DIY gift has no such pre-set limitations. You can follow your imagination to where ever it takes you. But adding a little bit of creative flair can create a Valentine's Day gift they'll never forget.

Here are a few ideas to get started.

CREATE A SCRAPBOOK

Arts and crafts stores typically have a huge selection of scrapbooks that can be used to build a one-of-a-kind gift. Dig into your digital files in advance to find memories that span the length of your relationship, then get them printed out. They are typically arranged chronologically, but feel free to let your imagination soar. Collecting fun memories from vacations or family gatherings into one place, for instance, may give the images a new impact.

COMPLETE IT TOGETHER

Consider purchasing something that's unfinished so that the two of you can work on the gift together. Candle-making kits typically arrive with everything you need in a single box, including a selection of essential oils in a variety of fragrances. Special soaps are a standard

Valentine's Day gift, so why not create your own instead of one with a pre-selected scent or color? Create a series of "open-when" letters to bring you closer throughout the day, and the rest of the year. They can be opened when your significant other misses you, or when they'd like a kiss. The options are only limited by your

own creativity.

OTHER COOL IDEAS

Decorate a glass jar with hearts, ribbons and other Valentine's Day-themed items, then fill it with handwritten rectangular-shaped pieces of paper detailing all of the things you love about them. The

heartfelt messages are sure to bring a warm smile. Mix and match favorite candies, savory items, cheeses, lean meats, even mini-bottles of favorite drinks into a hand-decorated basket. Make a map collage of places where key things happened in your love story, with hand-written memories about what made them so special.

