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Socket to me?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. After 45 years, I decided to live large...and *think* about buying a new socket set.

This decision to think did not come easily. The sockets I've lost and broken reflect on my mechanical character. Buying a new set -rather than replacements -- is a moral cop out. I am weak.

It is unfortunate that a farm cannot be operated without having to tighten or loosen nuts of various sizes at least weekly. (I'm not talking metaphorically about self-administered barnyard therapies that use the same procedures.)

Sockets make nut-and-bolt work easier and faster, because you don't have to reposition the tool after each turn as you do with a wrench.

The simplest socket set has one reversible ratchet with sockets of different sizes. Large nuts require large ratchets—i

snt that the truth?

A properly provisioned Farmer Fudd like me might have four ratchet sizes for four different sets of sockets.

The square stub on the ratchet that accepts the socket is called, the drive. The common drives are 1/4-inch, 3/8, 1/2 and 3/4. The larger drives use larger ratchets and larger sockets. A 3/4 drive would typically handle a nut ranging from about 7/8-inch wide to 1 7/8—something you might find on a bulldozer.

And to add complexity to a simple tool, sockets are sized either in inches (SAE) or for the metric system that scales in millimeters.

Socket sets are made from different alloy steels and are designed and manufactured to different quality levels. Cheap sockets crack, won't turn a tight bolt or will round off a nut. Cheap ratchets break.

Nuts with rounded edges are not preferred to those with

sharp edges except in American politics.

Mettrinch is both the most expensive and the best socket-set manufacturer. Snap-on is next, with Craftsman and Kobalt following. Harbor Freight is not to my liking.

You can easily drop \$1,000 for a complete set—four drives in both standard and metric, with extenders, flex sockets, deep sockets, thin-wall sockets, adapters, easy-to-read sockets, glow-in-the-dark sockets, sockets that wash socks and ratchets that offer free marriage counseling.

So I drove to my nearest Home Depot to get a feel for the merchandise. I asked the first, official-looking, HomeoDepotic woman to give me a hand.

Im looking for a socket set, I said politely. Oooo, how manly, she said.

Huh?

Its me, she said, Martha Stewart. Im here to promote Martha Stewart Living as well as Martha Stewart Working, Martha Stewart Rendering Judgment, Martha Stewart Doin Time...and my newest line, Martha Stewart Tools.

Egad! I mumbled to myself. Martha Stewart Tools! Her grasp has finally exceed her reach.

Now let me see...ratchets and sockets. Mine, of course, are organic and all natural.

I expected no less, I said.

Are you interested in a heritage set—they look old school but theyre not.

No.

Heirloom sockets? No.

Handmade? No.

Hyperlocal sourced?

No. I just want the regular.

But regular sockets are so...so common, she sniffed. Not that I judge a man by his ratchet. Of course, it is a handy metric. I just want the usual.

When necessary, I can stoop to sell the pedestrian .

Well, thats a comfort. I want a medium-alloy steel.

I prefer the pure, she purred. My passion is the unadulterated...straight from Nature. Im not comfortable with dilutions. What manner of person would choose 14-karat gold over the 100 percent, 24 karat?

I would if its a necklace. Pure gold would wear thin or break. Too soft.

I am not speaking of *wearing jewelry*, young man. I keep forgetting to adjust my advice to my immediate customer. Martha Stewart 24-karat gold jewelry is solely for display. Oh sure. A legal secretary -- I think they call them, paranormals -- might wear the mixed stuff to work, but I must be honest: The smell of gold alloys offends my nose, which is very practiced at being offended.

OK. Ill take chrome-plated steel.

Chrome? Ah chrome! Once so fashionable, then so gauche, now so resurgent, and always so reflective! I may swoon like a schoolgirl.

Try not to.

Chrome makes me flush. Sweat beads, I may pant. Would you like a glass of water? I asked.

What kind of glass? she asked. Oh never mind. You would probably bring me water in a paper cup. Dear mother!

I was just trying to be helpful.

A chrome socket set. Well, it might work stored in a hand-planed, hand-carved, hand-rubbed mahogany Federalist sideboard with dovetail joinery. Who could resist the attraction of such a discordant apposition?

Maam, Im just looking for a new socket set.

So...for a more plebian taste such as yours, you could

keep your sockets in a vintage pine box that was once repurposed as a spittoon in an authentic Vermont general store.

Ms. Stewart, maybe I should ask a regular sales person. No. I exist to serve. What color? Color?

Well, chrome is silvery.

My sockets come in plum, mauve, taupe and cinnamon . I also carry matching wrenches, nail-pullers and cranks.

I just want a good old American socket set.

Indeed. I, too, support American-made products. Fruitarian produce from the backyard. Artisanal truffles from under the spreading chestnut tree, if we had any American chestnut trees left. Good-for-you oil from olives crushed by the authentically ethnic feet of Italian-Americans.

Aren't you thinking about wine, not olive oil?

I accept only foot-crushed wine *and* oils. I detest the taste of stainless steel. Feet are much better for you.

I sense we're wandering off the subject of sockets .

No indeed. I, too, reject the shabby Chinese imports. Did you know they use scrap in their steel? Martha Stewart sockets come from coke and iron ore just as Mother Nature made them.

Yeswell.

They are as virginal as their creator—Martha Stewart . Well, yes.

I think every home should have a socket set, she said. It rounds out things—tempers the hard with the soft, the masculine and feminine, the practical with the idealistic. It adds congeniality to any décor.

I was thinking of keeping them in the shop...with the tractor.

A shop! How marvelous!

I work on equipment out there.

An equipment shop...its so honest. I smell a new product, Martha Stewart WD-40. I can also envision a line of repurposed, 200-thread cotton dress shirts as Martha Stewart shop rags, as

soon as I think of a more elegant name. Perhaps, Maintenance Linens?

I've never thought of my shop as honest, I confessed.

And a tractor...in the shop! What harmonious packaging! I would have never imagined it coming from you.

I sometimes surprise myself, I admitted.

And, I am sure, you've installed a passionate little wood stove that puffs away like an asthmatic on cold, crisp November mornings.

Maybe I better come back another day.

Mais non. That's French. Here, have a chocolate-chip-and-walnut cookie that my cookie assistant made this very morning.

I'm game.

My chocolate, I should point out, comes from a barely clad village in the Ivory Coast where barely sustained natives pick only one bean each day. Under Fair Trade rules they charge \$500 per bean, which is more than enough to allow them to rethatch their roofs every 20 years.

That bean is then flown to me on my Martha Stewart jet so that I can lovingly process it in my Martha Stewart home kitchen, which is only *slightly* larger than Denmark contrary to recent news accounts, within 90 minutes of having it plucked from its cacao tree.

My flour comes from wheat first hand-planted in the Holy Land by Solomon and Gomorrah. Martha Stewart raisins come from Tuscany's most ancient vineyards, whose grapes are nourished with compost from the Pope's own kitchen.

The walnuts...what nuts I have! Only hand-harvested, free-range natural walnuts from estates in Kent, grown on land given to titled gentlemen for servicing the Queen.

My oven -- well I have 10 -- uses no electricity or hydrocarbon fuel. Heat is supplied by 50 unpaid Martha Stewart

interns rubbing together where you can't see them.

These cookies are so good that I refuse to allow them to be eaten. I mount them like a collection of butterflies in my Martha Stewart library, between the blue Martha Stewart Picasso and the drippy Martha Stewart Pollock. But for you...well, just one.

Thanks, I said, biting into it. Good.

Good! They are exquisite. I can cook, even though I don't, unlike Paula Deen who, survey data show, routinely kills half her audience each season.

Very crunchy, I said, spitting out organic walnut shells with as much *savoir faire* as I could muster.

Oh here. Let me tidy you up while I lead us into hand tools.

As we walked to aisle five, she dabbed detritus off my shirt and swept up behind with a Martha Stewart heirloom straw broom and handpainted dustpan.

I recycle my own crumbs and droppings at my enchanted Connecticut homestead. My recycling assistant feeds them to my

endangered hogs, Orkney Island Oinkers, of which I own the last pair. My Martha Stewart cheerleaders encourage them to...you know.

Sometimes, conversational direction is best not followed.

Here we are, Martha said. These are my socket sets, and these...are *les autres*, which is also French.

Yours are very pretty, but they're twice as expensive as what I want to pay.

One pays for the brand, not the product, Martha Stewart said. The brand is *moi*.

I bet that's French, too, I said. But yes, she said.

I'll think I'll stick with regular old sockets.

But why? she asked. Are mine not more attractive? Are mine not so tasteful that they would bring tears of appreciation to

the eye of a rock? Are mine not, shall I say, hot?

They are indeed. The problem is they wont work. L ook, I said, showing her the ratchet and sockets, the male driv e stub on this ratchet is too big for the female socket receptacle. Your males dont fit your females.

My Word! I will kill those off-shore criminal manu facturers with a Martha Stewart .357 Magnum. I will feed their pinkies to my endangered hogs! I will peel their skin with my \$500 Martha Stewart high-carbon paring knife with the African blackwood handle and solid brass ferrule even though brass contains a tiny amount of lead, which will cause cancer if you eat six pounds of it daily for 30 years, which I hope they do, because Martha Stewart products should be too good for those who buy them, even when they dont work.

As I left, I saw Martha showing another customer how to string sockets together with a festive red ribbon for a home-made decorative Christmas tree chain.

I think Ill think some more about sockets before d oing anything so rash as buying some.

