

CHRISTMAS THREES (a seasonal puzzle from Dave Shukan)

Solve as a standard crossword, except that each individual box can contain 1, 2, or 3 letters. When the grid is filled, "open" all of the boxes containing 3 letters by reading the middle letter of each, to find an additional, timely present.

1	2	3			4	5	6		7	8	9	
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27	28	29			30		31		32			
33						34		35				
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		42			43		44					
	45					46			47			48
	49				50				51			
	52				53					54		

ACROSS

- 1 Hits hard, or hard hits
- 4 Some genetic molecules
- 7 Architect Saarinen
- 10 Hedge plants
- 12 *Three On _____* (1970's game show named after a cigarette-lighting superstition) (2 wds)
- 13 Acquires knowledge
- 14 Formal decree
- 15 States or qualities of being forceful or intense
- 17 One putting away a sword or knife, perhaps
- 19 Geographic zones or divisions
- 20 Berry, especially when ground, named for tasting like a mix of cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove
- 21 Trick-or-treating necessity
- 24 Imposed, as a tax or fine
- 26 Comes back down
- 27 Low-budget films, often
- 30 Covers with festive paper
- 32 Later-tattooed Holyfield biter
- 33 Religious councils
- 34 Duck known for its down

- 36 Type of eel

- 39 Bestowed property upon in connection with marriage
- 42 Giants (or occasionally Giants' opponents)
- 44 Aristocratic snobbery
- 45 Turned loose
- 47 Thorny bush
- 49 Proverbial life of ease liver
- 50 Hatcher on TV
- 51 Relative quality of resistance on the path often chosen
- 52 Italian leaders, including, notably, Mussolini
- 53 Pinch, cooking-wise
- 54 Cease and don't restart

DOWN

- 1 Flamboyantly wielded a sword (often while carrying a shield called a buckler)
- 2 Country singer Yearwood
- 3 Boxes within boxes within a spreadsheet, perhaps
- 4 Five stars! I'd give it six if I could! (2 wds)
- 5 Football's "Broadway Joe"
- 6 Devious plays
- 7 They vote directly for the U.S. President

- 8 In a sincere manner
- 9 Friend on *Friends*
- 11 Office supply superstore
- 16 Wafer brand
- 18 One might try to break it at a mixer (2 wds)
- 22 Namesakes of actress Thurman
- 23 Finishes with, as a positive note (2 wds)
- 25 Hang, like a curtain
- 27 Working well together or otherwise harmonious (2 wds)
- 28 Bird that no longer can't fly?
- 29 *_____ To Be Home Again* (James Taylor song, asking rhetorically for agreement as to associated positive feelings) (3 wds)
- 31 Beans or rice, often (2 wds)
- 32 Not good at all
- 35 Connecting rod
- 37 Ships' kitchens
- 38 Sea eagle
- 40 Online brokerage (hyph)
- 41 Allow to leave
- 43 Full
- 45 Language of Pakistan
- 46 He-Man's twin sister (hyph)
- 48 Whistler, for one