

Rx FOR LIFE

Prevent fire hazards from holiday decorations

BY GARY BROWN
GARY.BROWN@CANTONREP.COM

If Santa Claus were to quote Smokey the Bear, it would sound something like this: "Only you can prevent Christmas fires."

And there would be no ho, ho, ho-ing. Holiday safety is a serious business, according to CableOrganizer.com.

"While holiday decorating is all about adding fun, sparkle and warmth to a very special season, it's important to remember that many of our favorite decorations carry the risk of fire or electrical injury if not used carefully," said Karen Hayhurst, a representative of the online company that provides solutions to managing the assortment of cables and wires that are run hither and nither in most homes these high-tech days. "Don't let a preventable accident take the enjoyment out of your holidays — whether you're excitedly preparing for Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa."

Take a few minutes to consider these decorating safety tips offered by Hayhurst and the other experts at CableOrganizer.com.

LIGHTS AND DECORATIONS

"When shopping for lights, electric decorations and extension cords, purchase only the ones that are UL-listed."

■ If you're planning to decorate outdoors, make sure that you use lights and decorations that are rated for outdoor use. Putting indoor-only products

outside in the weather can result in electric shock and fire hazards.

■ If you're in doubt as to whether light strings are rated for indoor or outdoor use, just check the color-coded UL mark on the product's package. A green holographic UL mark says "indoors only, please," while a red one indicates that the product is safe for both indoor and outdoor use.

■ Whether they're brand-new out of the box or seasoned veterans from holidays past, before you put them up, inspect all lights, electric decorations and extension cords for signs of damage to wire insulation, plugs, and bulbs. If the damage can be repaired (i.e. replacing broken bulbs), do not use the item until the repair has been made. If cords and plugs are damaged, discard and replace the decoration.

■ Always unplug lights before changing bulbs, replacing fuses, or making any other

SEE HAZARDS D-2 repairs.

■ If you need to replace a bulb in a string of Christmas lights, make sure that the wattage rating of the replacement bulb you're using matches that of the light strand. Using a bulb with too high a wattage can cause the light string to overheat.

■ When hanging Christmas lights outdoors, reduce your risk of electric shock by passing up metal ladders in favor of ladders made of nonconductive materials like wood or fiberglass-reinforced plastic.

■ Use only lights and decorations in accordance with manufacturers' instructions.

■ Before you begin decorating, verify how many strands of lights it is safe to connect end-to-end (as a general rule, it's three).

■ Be careful not to overload extension cords. Before you start plugging in, find out the wattage rating of your extension cord, as well as the power requirements of any lights or decorations you're planning to plug into it. A wattage rating is the amount of electricity that an extension cord is built to carry, and if the combined power requirements (or "pull") of your lights and decorations exceed that rating, overheating and fire can occur.

■ Every so often, check Christmas light wires to make sure that they're not warm to the touch.

■ Always turn off all Christmas lights and decorations before going to bed or leaving the house.

BUYING A CHRISTMAS TREE

"Did you know that your choice of Christmas tree could affect its flammability factor? Older, dried-out trees ignite and burn much faster than those that are freshly cut and well hydrated, so when you're shopping for a natural (live) holiday tree, keep the following things in mind."

■ Before taking a Christmas tree home, make sure that its needles are fresh, green, and firmly attached to the branches. Bend the needles between your fingers — if they break, the tree is too dry. Also check



that the tree trunk's cut surface is sticky to the touch. As a final precaution, pick the tree up vertically and tap the trunk against the ground; if needles fall off, move on to another tree.

■ As a general rule, Christmas trees with thicker needles take longer to dry out, so a robust variety like the Noble Fir is a good choice.

■ If you opt for an artificial tree instead, be sure that it's flame-retardant.

SETTING UP YOUR TREE

"The way you set up and care for your tree has a big effect on how long it will last, how beautiful it will stay, and,

ultimately, how safe it will be to have in your home."

■ Before putting your new Christmas tree into its stand, cut a couple of inches off the bottom of the trunk to expose fresher (and far more absorbent) wood. Taking a few minutes to do this will improve your tree's water intake, and make it harder for your tree to catch fire.

■ Your tree stand should have a capacity of at least one gallon, which is the amount of water that the average 6-foot Christmas tree can consume in a day's time. As a general rule of thumb, live Christmas trees require one quart of water for every inch of trunk

diameter.

■ Water live Christmas trees daily.

■ Position trees a minimum of 3 feet away from candles, fireplaces, space heaters, radiators, heat vents, and other heat sources.

■ Because nearly half of all Christmas-tree fires involve electrical malfunctions, it's important to check that light strands and other electrical decorations are in good condition (free from insulation cracks, fraying wires or damaged bulbs and plugs) before decorating your tree with them.