

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Green up your holidays with LEDs and CFLs

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Contra Costa Times

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THE HOLIDAYS are a time of giving, so why not give Mother Earth a break this year by mixing in some energy-saving and green thinking with your holiday cheer?

From energy-smart lights to recycled gifts, options are plentiful.

Light it up

When it comes to dazzling outdoor lighting displays — traditional energy eaters — who better to ask than the lighting masters featured on lightsofthevalley.com, a Web site dedicated to massive, lighted holiday displays?

Many of the biggest decorators are turning to light emitting diode (LED) strings of lights for new wow and cheaper power bills.

Electrical engineer Richard Hamilton of 1931 Knollcrest Court in San Ramon has about 15,000 bulbs dazzling his synchronized animated light show, which plays every 30 minutes or so from 6 to 10 p.m. during December. He started switching to LED strings last year.

"I am a big proponent of LEDs," he says. "They are a lot more efficient and generally have close to the same amount of lumens (light) as traditional lights."

Hamilton also fitted his house with solar panels, so it takes about 30 minutes of sunlight to power the family's shows each night. If he did not have solar and he still were using traditional incandescent lights, he says he'd spend up to \$250 in December just to power his display. This year, he said, if he didn't have solar, the LEDs would probably cost only \$35 to run.

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Takes a licking

LED bulbs, particularly those with the Environmental Protection Agency's "Energy Star" label, consume 75 to 80 percent less power than traditional super bright bulbs. But that's not their only benefit. LEDs never get hot to the touch, reducing the risk of fire, and because they consume less power, you can string many more lights together without blowing a fuse.

"With the LEDs, you can run them over with a truck and they will keep on going," says Bob Stanley of 2612 Calle Reynoso in Pleasanton, a "must see" Christmas display according to the Lights of the Valley Web site.

Stanley spent about \$700 on LEDs last year, but for those of us with just an awning or a tree to light up, the upfront cost isn't as daunting. Several stores sell strings of 50 multicolor LED lights for \$5 each. Many electronic recycling centers will accept your castoff incandescent strings for free or for a small fee.

One downside to LED displays, the super-decorators say, is that although the reds and blues are richer in color, LEDs aren't available in every color. And because many lights run on a power cycle, LEDs have a slight flicker when glanced from the side.

The other bulbs

Maria Vargas of Energy Star says another way that lights can play a green role in your holidays is by giving compact florescent lamps (CFLs) to family members as a stocking-stuffer. She says CFLs save about \$30 during their lifetime over regular bulbs, pay for themselves over six months and last 10

times longer than incandescent bulbs.

"If every American home replaced just one light with a CFL, we'd save enough energy to light 3 million homes for a year," she says. "You can give them as gifts and feel good about it."

Another green idea from Vargas is paying attention to what you purchase for friends and loved ones. If you're in the market for a new computer, buy one

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with energy-saving features.

If shopping for power tools, buy products that are rechargeable and have charging decks with Energy Star labels. That label means the battery charger uses 35 percent less energy than a traditional charger, saving money as well as the environment.

The new green

Bob "Mr. Green" Schildgen, a Bay Area-based columnist for the Sierra Club's Sierra Magazine, says aside from decorating with LED strings, people can green their holidays by shopping smart and considering more handmade goods.

"Instead of driving all over creation to shop, you can take mass transit or ride with friends and lessen your impact," he says.

If you have a special talent, such as metal working, baking, knitting or carpentry, employ those skills to make gifts rather than buy them, he says.

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If your crafting talents are not up to par, reduce your overall impact by buying gift cards for friends and loved ones or purchasing "experience" gifts like concert tickets or music lessons. These gifts require little wrapping or packaging, he says.

And if you do buy big gifts and want to wrap them, you could save a tremendous amount of energy by reusing last year's wrapping paper or saving this year's to reuse next year.

"The saying is 'reduce, reuse and recycle.' Recycling paper is last on the list," he says. "True recycling saves a lot of resources but it doesn't save as much as reusing."

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