

Denita Young  
County Extension Agent -FCS  
Rains County

## **GIVE GIFT OF SAFETY THIS HOLIDAY SEASON**

COLLEGE STATION – Fun, festivities, family and friends – as the year winds down, the holiday season revs up. Unfortunately, along with all the celebrating and good cheer comes an increased risk of safety hazards, said Dr. Carol Rice, Texas Cooperative Extension health specialist. In order to make this year's holiday season a little safer, Rice offers the following decorating tips:

### **TREES**

For the look and feel and fragrance of the holidays, nothing beats a Christmas tree – a real pine Christmas tree fresh from the forest to the living room – decorated with ornaments and glitter and popcorn and lights. But these festive symbols can also be a fire hazard. According to the National Safety Council, more than 400 residential fires each year can be traced to Christmas trees, and these fires on average result in about 100 injuries and 40 deaths. This risk of fire can be reduced by following some simple steps when choosing a living Christmas tree, Rice said.

First, make sure the tree is fresh. Fresh trees are green with needles that don't bend, break or fall off easily, and trunks that feel sticky. Bounce the cut end of the trunk on the ground; if many needles fall off, the tree is too dry and is a fire hazard. After selecting just the right tree and taking it home, Rice advised, "cut off at least one inch of the trunk and mount the tree in a stable stand that holds water. Keep the water level above the cut to keep the tree fresh and green."

When it comes time to get rid of the tree, under no circumstances should you burn any part of the tree in a fireplace or wood-burning stove, she said. And if a tree becomes too dry before the season ends, dispose of it anyway. Dry Christmas trees are a major fire hazard and should be removed from the home, even before Dec. 25. One of the best and safest ways to dispose of post-season Christmas trees, Rice said, is "to take it to a recycling center. You may also be able to have it hauled away by a community pick-up service."

Even artificial trees have a potential for causing fires, she said. When choosing artificial Christmas trees, buy only those that have been labeled fire-resistant. And metallic trees should never be decorated with lights – according to information from Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center, that combination is a fire hazard.

### **LIGHTS**

The National Fire Protection Association has stated that cords and plugs are the most common cause of Christmas tree fires. Lights and extension cords used in outdoor decoration are also linked to an increased risk of fire, Rice added. To lessen that risk, buy lights that have the Underwriters Laboratory (UL) label, check the lights carefully for damage before buying them, and make sure indoor lights are used only indoors, and outdoor lights are used only outdoors. Each year before putting the lights up, check the strings for broken or cracked sockets, frayed wires or loose connections, Rice said. If the lights are damaged, don't use them – replace them instead. Don't plug in more than three strings into any one extension cord, don't run extension cords under rugs, and turn off all lights before going to bed or leaving the house.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission advised plugging outdoor electric decorations into circuits that are ground fault circuit interrupters. Contact a qualified electrician, or purchase portable GFCIs where electric supplies are sold.

## DECORATIONS

When it comes to decorating the tree, Rice said, remember that flame-resistant items are just as festive – and a whole lot safer – than more combustible ones. And if small children are around, don't use decorations that are sharp, might break or have small pieces. Make sure tinsel is non-leaded and read labels before using decorative items in jars or spray cans.

## CANDLES

Words to the wise from the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the National Safety Council: Never place a lighted candle on or near a Christmas tree. "Decorating with candles can also be a fire hazard," said information from the National Fire Protection Association. "Between 1994 and 1998, there were 9,930 home fires per year caused by candles, with an annual average of 119 deaths, 1,043 injuries and \$144.5 million in property damage associated." And that's not all. "December is the peak month for candle fires," the information goes on, "with nearly twice the average number of incidents."

To keep the beauty of holiday candles but eliminate some of the hazard, Rice said, make sure lighted candles are never left unattended. Don't burn candles near anything that could catch fire and keep them away from children and pets. Read and follow manufacturers' instructions. Trim the wick to about one-quarter inch before lighting; use only sturdy candles placed on stable, heat-resistant surfaces. Enjoy candles in well-ventilated areas only; keep lighted candles at least three inches away from each other; and always blow them out when leaving the room or going to sleep. Keep the holidays more festive this year by eliminating potential safety hazards.

For more information on these and other health issues, visit the Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Family and Consumer Web site at <http://fcs.tamu.edu/> and click on the link to health and safety or contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903-473-5000, ext. 157.

The information herein is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended or no endorsement by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service is implied.

Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin.

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating.

