

Decorating Safely with Outdoor Lights

While our northern neighbors can dream of a snowy "white" Christmas, Texans are more likely to experience a wet holiday season. Electric lights and water can be a fatal combination, so the State Fire Marshal's Office offers the following tips for safely decorating your house with electric lights during this holiday season.

- Use only outdoor lights outside your home, and use only lights that have been tested for safety by a recognized testing laboratory, such as Underwriters' Laboratories.
- Check each set of lights, new or old, for broken or cracked sockets, frayed or bare wires, or loose connections, and throw out damaged sets. Shut off electrical power when replacing bulbs and keep it off while putting up outdoor lighting. Finally, before putting up holiday lights, check each light set by setting it on a nonflammable surface and plugging it in for 10-15 minutes to see that the lights don't melt or smoke.
- Use no more than three standard-size sets of lights per single extension cord.
- Always use extension cords with a three-prong plug that are approved for outdoor use by an organization such as Underwriters Laboratory. Never use indoor extension cords outside.
- Avoid standing in water while handling electrical wiring or using power tools.
- Use a dry, wooden ladder when hanging holiday lights, to reduce the chance of an electrical shock. Be sure to stay clear of overhead electrical wires.
- Waterproof all electrical connections and keep them elevated so that rain water won't drain into the connection and possibly cause a shock or short circuit. Similarly, make sure individual bulb sockets are pointed downward, to avoid moisture buildup.
- For added electric shock protection, plug outdoor electric lights and decorations into circuits protected by ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs). Portable outdoor GFCIs can be purchased where electrical supplies are sold. GFCIs can be installed permanently to household circuits by a qualified electrician.
- Fasten outdoor lights securely to trees, house walls, or other firm supports to protect the lights from wind damage. To hold light strings in place, use only insulated staples (not nails or tacks) that are hammered in. Using a staple gun increases the chance of electrical shock. Or, run strings of lights through hooks (available at hardware stores).
- Do not cover lamps with decorations that were not supplied with the light set. The set may not be designed to handle the increased heating and could melt, thereby exposing live parts.
- Never allow bulbs to touch combustible material, such as plastics, pine needles or leaves, and grass.
- Turn off all lights when you go to bed or leave the house. The lights could short out and start a fire.