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Holiday Lights: Festive, Merry and Bright

By Cathy Dausman



Holiday lights on display at Orchard Nursery in Lafayette. Photo Andy Scheck

Festive, sparkling, colorful. The very words connote holiday celebrations, but they can also be used to describe lighting itself. Whether indoor or outdoor, low voltage or incandescent, temporary or permanent, lighting sets the mood in our homes and affects the very mood of our guests.

Light ambiance comes from both its source - a floor lamp, an overhead fixture, candles, luminarias, a wall sconce or footlight - and color spectrum, from the cool blue of fluorescent tubes to the soft orange flicker of a candle.

Suzanne Warrick of Interiors in Lafayette says Christmas lighting goes "above and beyond what you live with daily."

"It's a more joyous occasion and holiday lighting gives you a focus - a tree, wreath or garlands," she explains.

Warrick suggests adding votive and decorative candles as accent pieces to introduce romance to a room and a multi-sensory feel from the candle's smell and flicker. Candles placed in carved pomegranates or pumpkins, or candles set in hurricane lamps filled with bird seed or cranberries can highlight your home's color scheme, she says. Take a cue from jewelry stores that use skylights or low-voltage lights to make everything sparkle.

Peggy Hoffmann brings the weather inside her Moraga home by hanging "snow" lights from Orchard Nursery in her

living room windows. "They are tubes of lights hung vertically and then individual lights in the tubes light up sequentially so that it looks like a snow flake falling to the ground," she says, adding they're "lots of fun and different." Local electrician Rob Omo likes to drive around during December just to see what people do with outdoor lighting. He admits he's not a big fan of the programmed lights and music shows some homeowners put together, saying "it takes away the peace, quiet and tranquility of the season."

Light options today are myriad. Incandescent bulbs emit light as a byproduct of their heated filament. Neon, fluorescent and CFL lights use a gas filament. Halogen bulbs are bright - and plenty hot - and the bulbs themselves are fragile. The new LED, or light-emitting diode lights, deliver a computer chip glow and are basically cool to the touch. These low-power, high-efficiency lights may be shaped like a traditional bulb, but are also manufactured in strips and round "pucks." LEDs packaged in waterproof casings can be used outdoors and even underwater to highlight pools and waterfalls.

Elemental LED's Director of Marketing Jim Puchbauer says LED technology uses 25 percent less power than traditional filament lights, and last roughly 50,000 hours. He says LEDs work well for libraries and art gallery displays since they emit neither harmful ultra violet rays nor damaging heat. REACH, Elemental LED's philanthropic arm, recently partnered with Orinda Arts Council to install LED lighting in the Orinda Public Library display cases.

Steve Lambert, owner/designer of Orinda's Garden Lights agrees that the new generation LED is the way to go outside, as they offer color tone, longevity and weatherproof lighting. He suggests residents use white lighting, which "brings out the nature of the landscape," or add a bit of temporary color to their exterior light scheme using colored lenses.

Exterior pathways and steps should be lighted first for safety, Lambert says, before moving on to decorating the trees. He suggests homeowners minimize "light pollution" - unwanted light spilling into your neighbor's yard - when designing outdoor illumination.

Simply winding inexpensive strands of low-power lighting around tree trunks and along branches gives a yard an almost Disneyland feel at night. And neighborhoods can also create area-wide magic by setting out luminarias made of tea candles set in sand-filled paper bags. Home improvement stores offer a plastic version as well. Moraga's Rimer Court has had a luminaria display for the past nine years (see the Dec. 8, 2010 Lamorinda Weekly story at <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0420/pdf/Moragas-Luminarias-a-Bright-Christmas-Tradition.pdf>).

Any discussion of holiday lighting would be incomplete without including Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights. Rabbi Alissa Miller of Lafayette's Temple Isaiah explains the candles on the menorah are cumulatively lit over an eight day celebration. "The menorah is set into your window so everyone can see it," Miller says, recalling the powerful symbolism of light from a limited source at this darkest part of the year. Traditionally comprised of wax candles or wicks set in oil, electric menorahs are also available for safety reasons.

So look up, and light up your indoors and yards. Who knows, it may even ward off that year-end stress. Star light, star bright - fill your surroundings with decorative light!



Festive white bulbs light up the outdoors. Photo Cathy Dausman

Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

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