

# Opinion: Precautions can make for safe holiday season

By Tia Rancourt

The winter holidays are a time for celebration – and that means more cooking, decorating, entertaining and overall increased risk of fire due to heating equipment.

According to the National Fire Protection Agency, between 2005-09, U.S. fire departments responded to an average of 240 home fires that started with Christmas trees per year. These fires caused an average of 13 deaths, 27 injuries, and \$16.7 million in direct property damage annually.

There are simple life-saving steps you can take to create a safe and happy holiday.

## **Preventing Christmas tree fires:**

- o Selecting a tree for the holiday – When buying a live tree, look for one that is not shedding needles. If needles fall off or branches snap when bent, the tree is already too dry.
- o Keep trees watered. A mixture of lemon-lime soda and water will keep a tree moist longer.
- o Keep trees away from all heat sources including fire places, stoves and room/space heaters.
- o When purchasing an artificial tree, look for the label “fire resistant”.
- o Secure the tree firmly in tree stand to keep it from toppling over.
- o When tree becomes dry, promptly discard it. Please consider using the IVGID Waste Not Free Holiday Tree Recycling Program.

## **Lights and candles:**

- o Please do not use candles on a Christmas tree.
- o Place candles where they will not be knocked down.
- o Keep candles away from curious pets and children's reach.
- o Be extremely careful with candles that have leaves, flowers, pine cones or other decorative items cast into them. These items can become wicks and ignite the candle in a way that the candle is not designed.
- o Keep lights or candles away from anything that could easily catch fire. (NFPA reports that half of home candles fires occurred when some form of combustible material was left or came too close to the candle.)
- o Please do not leave holiday lights or candles unattended.
- o Inspect all lights and cords before using them. Discard all lights with cracked or broken wiring and never overload circuits.

## **Holiday decorations:**

- o Keep wrapping paper and ribbons away from heat sources. This includes candles, lights, fireplaces, stoves and heaters.
- o Wrapping paper and ribbon should be thrown away in trash containers, not fireplaces. Burning paper and ribbon could cause a chimney fire.
- o Put decorations high enough on the tree so your child or pet can't reach them. Children can choke or cut themselves on ornaments or ornament hangers.
- o Holly and mistletoe are poisonous. Keep them away from children.
- o Use only nonflammable or flame-retardant decorations and

place away from heat vents.

- o If you are using a metallic or artificial tree, make sure it is flame-retardant.

### **Watch what you heat:**

- o Stay in the kitchen when you are frying, grilling or broiling food. If you leave the kitchen for even a short period of time, turn off the stove.

- o If you are simmering, baking, roasting or boiling food, check it regularly and use a timer to remind you that you're cooking.

- o If you are using a turkey fryer, please follow the manufacturer's guidelines and instructions, and remember that the Underwriters Laboratories (UL) has chosen not to certify any turkey fryers with the UL mark because they consider them to be dangerous to use presenting numerous safety hazards to consumers.

### **Fireplace safety:**

- o Check and clean the fireplace and chimney every year.

- o Always put logs and newspapers on a grate inside fireplace and use a fireplace screen.

- o Please do not use gasoline, lighter fluid or kerosene to start a fire and make sure the fire you build "fits" your fireplace (use an appropriate amount of newspaper and logs).

- o Place completely cooled ashes in a metal container. Keep metal container outside away from the house in a safe place.

### **Give holiday gifts that promote fire safety:**

- o Smoke alarms. If a fire occurs, having a smoke alarm cuts the chance of dying by half.

- o Carbon monoxide detectors – helps detect carbon monoxide, a colorless, odorless, poisonous gas.
- o Flashlights for emergency lighting instead of candles, to avoid the risk of fire from an open flame.
- o Sturdy candleholders to prevent tip-over when candles are lit.
- o Sturdy fireplace screen, to keep embers out of the room.
- o Gift certificates for chimney cleaning can reduce oily creosote build-up in chimneys that can be easily ignited.
- o Portable fire extinguishers, with clear instructions on how to use them.
- o Oven mitts for handling cooking equipment.
- o House address numbers – our local ordinance requires 6 inch for residential and 12 inch for commercial structures.

*Tia Rancourt works for the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District.*