

SPOKANE

Light 'em up

Some homes, businesses turn to pros for holidays

Megan Cooley
Correspondent
December 1, 2008

Joe Stoy is dreaming of a white Christmas.

That's because last year's snow created a perfect backdrop for the woodland light scene he and his wife, Kathy, created in their Spokane Valley yard.

The Stoys lined up blue net lights to mimic a stream, and then placed eight illuminated deer – three of which are animated – around it.

"Some were standing in the stream, some were drinking from it," says Stoy, who lives at 1104 N. Perrine St.

"The stuff I do is not real elaborate. ... It's simple, but it looks nice."

Whether understated or over the top, it's the time of year again when the Clark Griswold in many Inland Northwesterners comes out.

Holiday lights have appeared on several homes already (not counting those neighbors who leave them up all year), so the slow-moving tours down particularly well-decorated streets must be just around the corner.

Bob Landaker, manager of Senske Lawn and Tree Care's Spokane branch, says his crews have been busy stringing lights on homes and businesses since October. They don't flip the switches until November, but they have to start decorating early to reach the 375 or so clients who use their service every year.

Senske began offering Christmas decorating services 10 years ago as a way to retain good employees who the company otherwise lost to layoffs every winter. The décor arm of the company operates under a franchise agreement called Christmas Décor by Senske.

The average customer pays about \$450 for the service, which includes the hanging of the lights and any other decorations, service throughout the holidays in case something breaks, and removal and storage of the products. Customers receive a 25 percent price break the following year if they order the service again.

Most homes take four or five hours to decorate, but larger or more complicated properties take up to two days, Landaker says. The company's biggest challenge always is decorating the Glover Mansion, in downtown Spokane, because of its steep roofs, he says.

Senske has one client who orders \$8,000 worth of lights on their home, including the decoration of 20 trees, lining the house's architectural features and hanging six wreaths.

"We make that puppy shine," Landaker says.

He says the reason why people order the service seems to be shifting. Previously, he most often heard customers say they didn't want to fight the weather or the challenge of decorating in hard-to-reach places.

"Lately, we've been hearing about time. People just don't have the time" to do it themselves, Landaker says.

He's also noticing increasing requests for LED (light emitting diode) lights, which use 90 percent less energy than incandescent lights.

The average Senske customer who uses incandescent lights pays about \$30 extra per month on his electric bill while a home is decorated, Landaker says. By comparison, clients who use LED lights shell out about \$5 – if that.

Wayne Henton, assistant manager of The Home Depot store in Spokane Valley, says he's seeing more interest in LED holiday products,



An impressive nativity and angel made of lights are among the scenes that have been found over the years in the Spokane area. (File/The Spokesman-Review)

Show us your display

Are you lighting up the night in a big way this year? How about your neighbors? We'd like to know about it for our list of neighborhood holiday light displays. Just go to spokesmanreview.com/holidaylights and give us the details. We'll compile a list online, and print it in the paper later, too.

too.

"LEDs have been out for a couple years, but this is the first year people are coming in looking for LEDs rather than stumbling into them," he says.

Henton says customers don't mind paying a few dollars more per box for LED because the lights last longer – about 20 years – and because you can string 80 or 90 strands of LED lights together on one outlet.

Count Curt Miller among those contemplating energy efficiency this season.

The North Spokane resident and his wife, Irene, wrap their house in more than 20,000 lights and hundreds of decorations each year. Curt dons a Santa Claus costume every night after work to greet the 4,000 people who stop by, a count he reaches by calculating the number of candy canes he distributes.

The Millers, who live at 7020 N. Calispel St., have been decorating like this for at least seven years. Some of their figures are antiques they've bought while traveling, including a lighted snowman they found for \$25 off Route 66 in Amarillo, Texas.

Curt says he stays warm in his Santa suit and has considered buying a new, more elaborate one, but "the really super nice ones cost \$500 or \$600, and that's what my electric bill is every December."

Yes, literally.

In light of the sour economy and the desire to conserve energy, the Millers are considering reducing the number of decorations they'll put out this year. But Curt says the couple has had that conversation before and never follows through.

"(Irene) says, 'We're going to cut back,' until KXLY or Q-6 comes out with their big (TV) truck and she has to parade around in her Mrs. Santa suit," he says.

To the Millers, decorating the house is their way of spreading holiday cheer to the community.

For the last two years, Curt has been touched by a young girl who has "brought Santa a present" as a thank you for the display. And he's always moved by the elderly visitors who arrive on tour buses from their group homes.

"I get on the bus and sit down and hold hands with them," he says. "The joy that it brings them is unbelievable."