

December Fire Safety Theme: Christmas Trees & Candles

The National Association of State Fire Marshals Public Fire Education Committee encourages your jurisdiction to use this monthly fire safety theme to assist in the prevention of injuries, death and destruction caused by fire. A unified theme will increase the potential of reducing associated losses by providing national media attention to specific problems. The red lettering is designed for you to insert your specific agencies name, and authority for personalized quotes.

Standards on the Use of Christmas Trees Adopted by the: South Carolina State Fire Marshal's Office

The South Carolina State Fire Marshal's Office has adopted the 2003 International Fire Code that prohibits the use and display of natural cut trees and vegetation in many public buildings that are not protected by an approved automatic sprinkler system. Churches, night clubs, auditoriums, schools, classrooms, covered malls, departments stores, hotels, motels, and dormitories are only a few of the occupancies effected by these standards. In Institutional Occupancies such as hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, etc., there is no exception that allows the use of natural cut trees and vegetation.

Many people choose to use natural cut trees to decorate their homes. "Beautiful decorations are traditional in the lives of South Carolinians, but it is important to know that these decorations lead to added fire risks if safety precautions are not followed," says John Reich, Deputy Director of Fire and Life Safety. According to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission there are approximately 400 Christmas tree fires in the US annually, accounting for 10 fatalities, 80 injuries, and 15 million dollars in property damage. When decorating for the holidays, guard against blocking any exit door with Christmas trees or decorations that could interfere with being able to escape in the event of a fire. Natural cut trees should be secured in a sturdy tree-stand to prevent falling or being knocked over. Only use "cool lamp" holiday lights for inside decorations that have been approved by a nationally recognized testing laboratory. Before stringing lights, check for loose connections, broken or cracked sockets, frayed wires or places where bare wire is exposed. Damaged sets of light should be discarded. Always remember to disconnect decorative lights when you leave your home or retire for the evening. Christmas trees should be freshly cut with the butt end stored in water the entire time the tree is inside your home. Dispose of your tree when the needles begin to fall in large quantities. This is a sign that the tree is dangerously dry.

Candles have become an increasingly popular decoration. In 1999, Fourteen percent of the candle fires occurred in December, this is almost twice the 8% monthly average, as reported by the National Fire Protection Association. Make certain candles are placed away from anything combustible and cannot be easily tipped over. It is important to keep combustibles at least three feet away from open flames. The Office of the State Fire Marshal offers these tips for safe candle use:

- Extinguish all candles when leaving the room or going to sleep.
- Keep candles away from things that can catch fire, such as clothing, books, paper, curtains, Christmas trees, or decorations.
- Place candles on stable furniture in sturdy holders that won't tip over and that are big enough to collect dripping wax.
- Don't place lit candles in windows, where they may ignite blinds or curtains.
- Place candles only in areas where they won't be knocked over by children or pets.
- Extinguish taper and pillar candles when they get within two inches of the holder or decorative material. Extinguish votive and filled candles before the last half-inch of wax starts to melt.

Fire safety year around is important, but during the holiday season, the potential for fire is greater. Working smoke alarms and a planned and practiced exit plan is a must,” adds Reich.