

House+Home

Online Extra
Post photos of your favorite holiday lights display — and see other readers' top picks — at www.mercurynews.com/features.

TWELVE NIGHTS OF LIGHTS

It's the second-most awaited list of the season. While we don't keep track of who has been naughty or nice, we do keep track of just who among us makes a real spectacle out of Christmas. We suggest this year you savor the experience with Twelve Nights of Lights, light-viewing destinations for each of a dozen nights.

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MERCURY NEWS

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Close-up maps of
Twelve nights of lights

WHAT TO EAT

A tin of cookies is an absolute necessity when you're light-gazing. Sure, some homes pass out candy canes. But you won't get a lot of mileage out of a miniature candy cane. And what's a tour of holiday lights without Dad grumbling about all the cookie crumbs — while he munches away?

This year, how about an alternative to the traditional sugar cookie? This sour cream cut-out cookie recipe came from Lands' End, which used to have a fine tradition of publishing Christmas cookie recipes from its associates. Alas, a recent search of www.landsend.com found lots of jaunty merchandise but no recipes. You'll want to use regular sour cream in this recipe, rather than low-fat; it's best to skip it elsewhere in your diet to save calories. The cookies have a slight tang and can easily be iced or decorated with sprinkles.

Sour cream cookies

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| 1 cup shortening | 1 teaspoon baking soda |
| 1/2 cups sugar | 5 cups flour |
| 2 eggs | 1/2 teaspoon salt |
| 2 teaspoons vanilla | 2 teaspoons baking powder |
| 1 cup sour cream | |

Cream together shortening and sugar. Add eggs and vanilla. Add baking soda to sour cream and add to mixture. Stir together flour, salt and baking powder and add to creamed mixture. Stir until stiff batter forms. Roll out cookies and cut into shapes (add more flour if needed). Bake at 400 degrees for 10 to 12 minutes.

From: Lands' End

A LITTLE GOOD CHEER

Of course, a little cheer in this case must be of the non-alcoholic variety. Our beverage of choice is a spiced cranberry-apple cider that has the added benefit of providing that wonderful aroma of cinnamon we associate with the holidays. To our mind, it's much preferable to passing around one of those pine-scented, tree-shaped air fresheners.

If you're looking for shortcuts, simply heat up a bottle of Trader Joe's spiced apple cider and pour it into your travel mug.

Spiced cranberry-apple cider

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|----------------------------------|--|
| 2 3-inch cinnamon sticks | 3/4 cup maple syrup |
| 1/2 teaspoon whole allspice | 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice |
| 12 whole cloves | 1 quart apple cider |
| 1 quart cranberry juice cocktail | Orange and lemon slices studded with cloves, for garnish |

Place the cinnamon, allspice and cloves on a small square of cheesecloth, bring the corners together and tie with kitchen string. (If you don't have cheesecloth, simply add the spices to the cranberry juice and pour the mixture through a sieve before adding the cider.)

In a soup pot, mix together the cranberry juice, maple syrup and lemon juice. Add the spice bag and place over medium heat. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for 20 minutes to blend the flavors. Remove from the heat, cover and let steep for 15 minutes.

Remove and discard the spice bag and stir in the apple cider. Reheat to desired temperature. If you're drinking the cider at home, garnish each drink with orange and lemon slices.

From "Christmastime Treats: Recipes and Crafts for the Whole Family" by Sara Perry

GETTING THERE

In a perfect world, where we're all filthy rich, I suppose I'd go out and buy a new \$62,000 Lexus LS 460 (or the longer \$72,000 LS 460 L) to go see holiday lights. This is the car — you've seen the TV ads — that helps you parallel park. In negotiating for a tight spot along Crippis Park in Fremont, it would make things much easier.

But, no, that's not going to happen for most of us. Instead, another high-tech tool makes the hunt for merriment less taxing. A mobile navigation system allows you to type in an address and get directions — an invaluable aid when the kids are demanding *bigger, better, brighter* displays. The nearest one I've tried lately is the RoadMate 2200T from Magellan. It's relatively small, about the size of a shirt pocket. Still, it offers turn-by-turn directions with voice prompts and on-screen arrows. Millions of points of interests are inside, which means you can find the nearest coffee shop for a latte and hot chocolate after your tiring winter's night journey. The 2200T lists for \$499.99, but I've found it as cheap as \$431 online. It's easily portable, too, so you can hand it over to Santa for his sled on Dec. 24.

— Matt Nauman, auto editor

WHAT TO SING

Personally, we find the traditional mangling of Christmas carol lyrics rather charming. But for those of you who are of a more orderly nature, a couple of Web sites offer assistance for the family light tour singalong. Check out www.carols.org.uk for lyrics and a bit of background on the songs and the history of Christmas carols. You'll also find lyrics at www.christmas-carols.net.



THE FIRST NIGHT:
Train of Lights
 Perhaps the coolest holiday lights experience in the Bay Area is also the toughest ticket to score. Sadly, it's simply too-late for those of us who don't have tickets in hand to hop aboard this year. The Pacific Locomotive Association runs trains festooned with Christmas lights through Niles Canyon during the holiday season, and the rides are so popular that they sell out almost as soon as sales open (usually in September) on the Niles Canyon Railway Web site at www.ncry.org. But for this year, check the Web site for train times and plan to watch the train go by in downtown Niles in Fremont.



THE SECOND NIGHT:
Menlo Park/Redwood City
 The home at 728 15th Ave. in Menlo Park lights up the street with decor on the roof, fence and lawn. Nearby, almost every house on St. Mary's Place, near the intersection of Marsh Road and Florence Street in Redwood City, pitches in.



THE THIRD NIGHT:
East Palo Alto/Palo Alto
 Nelvun Joseph stops traffic with her extensive display at 2693 Gonzaga St., near Notre Dame and Purdue in East Palo Alto. Her corner lawn is a wonderland of Santas, reindeer, snowmen, toy soldiers and wrapped gifts.
 Among our personal favorites is the long-running Christmas Tree Lane in Palo Alto. Fulton Street, off Embarcadero, is one of those destination light-gazing spots during the holidays. You'll need to park elsewhere if you want to walk the street.



THE FOURTH NIGHT:
Fremont
 Fremont's two splashiest displays are a study in contra the modern Victorian-style homes of Espada Court and Z Place (the nearest major street is Mission Boulevard) are adorned in classic, elegant fashion. Across town, the hot around Cripps Place (the nearest major street is Fremont ward) are a merry parade of wooden cartoon and comic book characters.



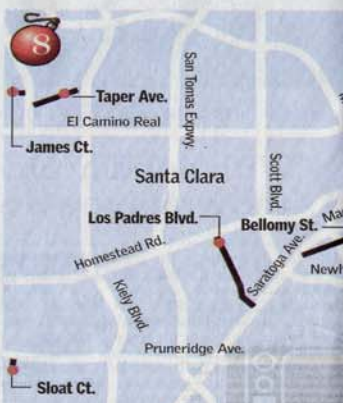
THE FIFTH NIGHT:
Mountain View/Saratoga
 The Bianco family train extravaganza is so popular the family is now seeing second- and third-generation visitors. For more than three decades, Ernest Bianco and his family have made merry with G Gauge trains at 2387 Adele Ave. in Mountain View. Please note the trains aren't in operation on Mondays. At 18960 Greenbrook Ct. in Saratoga, look for Disney characters and an all-out display.



THE SIXTH NIGHT:
Sunnyvale
 The homes at 1164 and 1168 Tangerine Way are the must-see, destination attractions of the holiday lights season. Just how over the top are these homes? Well, the families maintain a Web site, complete with FAQ and the chance to be on their e-mail mailing list. Check out www.severex.com/xmas.html.
 A half block away, at 548 Utica Drive is another display worth a look. And check out 757 Sheraton Drive and a home at the corner of Hollenbeck and Sheraton. At the end of the 600 block of East Bryan Avenue, near Fair Oaks and Evelyn, the display raises money for pediatric brain tumor research. Things get busy on the roof at 1593 Blackhawk Drive with Santa, reindeer and train on the roof. Nearby, houses on Crow Court off Inverness attract a steady stream of visitors.



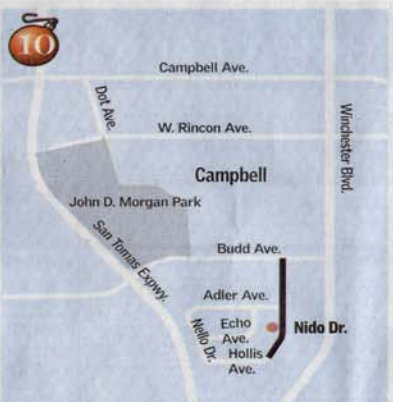
THE SEVENTH NIGHT:
Downtown San Jose
 Almost every tidbit you see on Christmas in the Park mentions that the display, located in Plaza de Cesar Chavez, leans toward the hokey. Sure, the little vignettes are a bit cheesy and careworn. We don't see this as a bad thing.
 Christmas in the Park is about tradition and ritual, and it looks best — dare we say, even a little magical — under twinkly night lights. And of course, after strolling through Christmas in the Park — this is not a drive-by experience — you should venture over to Downtown Ice, where you can either take a twirl around the ice or watch others do so.



THE EIGHTH NIGHT:
Santa Clara
 The Cassidy home, at 375 Los Padres Blvd., near Saratoga Boulevard, has been a winner for 10 years running in the lights contest. It's a commitment to extravagance on the lights part, with 50,000 lights, animated figures and visits to Santa on Dec. 22 and 23. At 345 Sloat Ct., off Pruneridge Chavez family synchronizes 25,000 lights to music transmitted to FM radios. Ron and Laura Starnes run a snow machine most nights on Katie's tree farm, their themed display at 3190 James Ct. Also look for marvelous displays of excess at 2976 Taper Ave. and 1450 Bellomy St., where Santa visits on in-line skates.



THE NINTH NIGHT:
San Jose
 Fans rave about 6226 Hancok Ave. In Almaden, Hampswood Way decorates in a big way. At 6408 San Anselmo Way, Mark Dean's home includes the requisite light extravaganza, wood cutouts, slide shows and "added surprises." The McEuens, at 2056 Cirone Way, have made much of their own displays over the last two decades. At 1213 Midpine Ave., Rick Llanos managed to coax the family's visiting foreign exchange students into helping with the display each year. The Greccos, at 737 Riverpark Drive, off Hellyer, "go crazy," report our scouts.



THE 10th NIGHT:
Campbell
 Debi J. Phelps carries on a decade-long tradition, festooning the four-plex at 595 Nido Drive with more than 45,000 lights. On Mitchell Court, neighbors push each other in friendly competition; Michael Grodin says "My house has always been the Griswolds," with an abundance of lights and a dozen inflatables.



THE 11th NIGHT:
Fantasy of Lights
 OK, it galls us a bit to actually pay to see Christmas lights. But the kids love our annual expedition to the Fantasy of Lights in Los Gatos' Vasona Lake County Park. The oversized light sculptures, for a better word, are kid-oriented and rather whimsical. New this year is a herd of dinosaurs, but our favorite remains Santa shooting baskets.
 So, pack the car to the gills, and head out to the park. It's \$12 per carload, with a limit of nine passengers, and a bit more for vehicles with more occupants. The Fantasy is open through Dec. 31 from 6 to 10 p.m. nightly. Weeknights are your best bet.



THE 12th NIGHT:
Los Gatos/Monte Sereno
 Check out the full-size sleigh and the train at 17843 And St., near North Santa Cruz and Rose Avenues, in Monte Sereno then head to Tait Avenue off Highway 9 for a well-decorated street.