

Many take dim view of new-fangled Christmas lights

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In this photo taken on Dec. 19, 2009, Gary Barksdale's home in Norman, Okla. is decorated with a mix of vintage incandescent bulbs and LED lights for the holidays. While acknowledging LEDs are more durable and use up to one-hundredth the amount of electricity as incandescents, Barksdale grows nostalgic sorting through broken bulbs and overloaded fuses every year. "It's part of the holiday tradition," said Barksdale. (AP Photo/Alonzo Adams)

(AP) -- To Steven Walls, it's beginning to look nothing like Christmas, anywhere he goes.

While more people make the switch to energy-efficient lights for their holiday decorations, Walls this year insisted on decorating with the old-style, torpedo-shaped [Christmas](#) lights his family has put up for years. But it was no easy feat: To replace the half-dozen or so bulbs that burned out last year, Walls had to visit eight stores before he found any.

"They're not the same. They're weird-looking. They're sized different and have these unusual ripples. If you have those interspersed with your traditional lights, they're going to look dumb," he said.

The old two-inch, 9-watt incandescent bulbs may be the gas guzzlers of holiday lights, but they remain a holiday staple in homes across the country. Many people aren't willing to trade the chubby, colorful halo effect for the softer glow of a light-emitting diode, or [LED](#). And as retailers increasingly stock the more energy-efficient lights, lovers of the classic lights scramble to find them, fearing they will soon be gone from shelves for good.

While acknowledging LEDs are more durable and use up to one-hundredth the amount of electricity as incandescents, Gary Barksdale grows nostalgic sorting through broken bulbs and overloaded fuses every year.

"It's part of the holiday tradition," said Barksdale, 46, of Norman. Failing to find replacement fuses, he strung a few lights together and ran a tether to his 9-year-old son, Gus. Together they climbed atop the roof of his one-story home. For him, the old lights are part of a holiday tradition.

"We're doing the same thing my pops, my brothers and I did when we were kids," he said.

LED lights are made of plastic, but Barksdale said dropping and shattering a brightly colored glass bulb is just part of the holiday routine.

"When you're finding shards of purple glass in the summer when you mow the grass, you can remember the fun you had at Christmas," he said. "There's a certain nostalgia to having those big glass bulbs that we put up as a kid."

Despite their passionate fan club, incandescent lovers are a dying bunch. Strands of LEDs are more expensive than incandescents, but the LEDs are much cheaper to run. Retailers say the long-term savings may be driving people to stores to make the switch.

John Banta, a project leader for New York-based Consumer Reports, said LEDs provide more benefits than just energy savings.

"They run cooler, so there's less of a chance of a fire hazard," Banta said. "They're much more durable and they did last longer."

Aaron Hassen, a spokesman for Alpharetta, Ga.-based Christmas Lights Etc., one of the nation's largest online retailers of Christmas lights, said a number of large commercial customers, including cities, towns and theme parks, invested in the new technology in recent years, but now he is seeing more consumers making the switch for their homes.

"Sales of LEDs are up more than 200 percent over last year," Hassen said. "Nobody could have predicted in a down economy that they would be investing in a product that costs more right off the shelf."

Even Santa Claus made the switch. The small town of Santa Claus, Ind., this year erected a new tree with LEDs, and the new lights also dot the town's 1.2-mile display around the Lake Rudolph Camp Ground.

But Santa Claus resident Herman Souder - who hangs thousands of the older-style incandescents on his two-story home in the Christmas Lake neighborhood - is staying with the old standby. He tried a strand of LEDs but they didn't provide the same punch, so he took them down. He said he will switch over eventually, when LEDs become brighter, in an effort to save on an electric bill that can include \$200 or more for Christmas lights alone.

"The lights were real close together and they weren't very bright," said Souder, 69. "The blue, green and red were OK, but they were really dim, and the gold didn't hardly show up at all."

David Shields of Purcell, Okla., said the old bulbs just look like Christmas. Shields' wife, Karen, said she visited four stores, including two Wal-Marts, Lowes and Home Depot, before finding replacement bulbs at a farm and ranch supply store in nearby Norman.

"My neighbor has the LED lights, and it just looks more like a modern discotheque over there," he said. "I like the vintage look, the old-school look. That's the way everybody's lights used to be growing up."

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