



Sunday, Nov 08, 2009

Article Last Updated: 12/20/2004 07:07:01 AM

Decorators leery of lawn Santa snatchers

THE holiday spirit bites some folks with the decorating bug, often with elaborate results that rival the glitz of Vegas. Unfortunately, Grinches still lurk in the shadows, eager to steal the joy of the holiday season.

Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows.

Whatever the reason, it never fails that some holiday decorations are pilfered each year.

"Vandalism isn't in the spirit of the season," one Pleasanton resident said from her lavishly decorated home. "They're not really taking from an individual house. They're taking from the entire community. If a house has been vandalized, even if it's not my own, then that impacts everyone."

Each year, a few treasured decorations are stolen from their temporary outdoor homes. In early December, some lighted polar bears and a Santa sleigh with an entire team of reindeer were stolen from homes in Pleasanton Meadows. The loss was valued at more than \$700. One polar bear alone cost \$150.

"You could get people from out of town driving through and they might want to use it for their own decorations,"

Pleasanton police Officer Jerry Niceley said of the seasonal sneaks. "Sometimes certain things appeal to juveniles. A lot of times they go out trophy collecting. That's why we get street signs missing. It could be that type of crime. This time of year, they might want to collect Christmas trophies."

The plundered trimmings could be sold to unsuspecting revelers, at flea markets or through online auction sites, Niceley noted.

Dean Anderson's family was stunned when holiday Grinches recently kidnapped a singing Santa right from their front porch.

While Anderson's wife had suspected the motion-sensor singing Santa may be too tempting for thieves to resist, her husband thought, "Where's your Christmas spirit?" he recalled. "Nobody's going to steal a Santa right off your doorway. Lo and behold, we come back from a weekend of skiing and it was gone."

The Andersons' two young children were bummed that Old Saint Nick was pilfered from their porch. The story has a happy ending, as the wayward Santa turned up in a backyard across town. Santa is once again singing on his original Dublin porch.

"I'm going to put a cable on his leg and anchor him in the doorway so nobody can walk off with it," Anderson said shortly after retrieving Santa from the Dublin Police Department.

Several homeowners with elaborate holiday displays have installed small surveillance cameras to deter dastardly fiends.

"We have some signs up this year that say there are cameras on the premises," said one Pleasanton decorator who wanted to remain anonymous. "If you put up a camera, you have to put up a sign."

A more low-tech approach to thwarting thieves would be to run thick cables or chains to safely anchor items, Officer Niceley said.

"You could run thin steel cable or chains through your more expensive decorations to keep them from being stolen," he suggested. "You could lock all of your decorations together. There's no way (thieves) could get away with everything without making a huge racket."

Single items can be secured to a tree or a support post on your house, he said.

"If you have anything that is important to you, you should mark it so that it can be identified," Niceley said. "Take pictures of all of your stuff so you'll have a record if anything gets stolen."

If your lighted reindeer or treasured trolls end up on e-bay or in a police property room, it will be easier to claim them if they're marked with your name, address or phone number.

Holiday thieves can be thwarted the same way year-round thieves are stumped — with ample outdoor lighting. When holiday lights are off for the evening, be sure to leave on regular outdoor lights, Niceley said.

"Why would you be walking around unlit Christmas decorations at night?" he said. "It will be pretty obvious that they're up to no good."

Despite the Santa caper, Anderson still believes in the true spirit of the season. The Santa thieves, he believes, were an evil anomaly.

"If I have to (anchor everything down), maybe Christmas just isn't Christmas," he said. But then he thought of the family's beloved Santa and the horrors he might have endured during his Santa-napping episode.

"If I have any more problems," Anderson pondered, "maybe I'll put out a surveillance camera and catch the little Scrooges."

Be sure to check out www.lightsofthevalley.com for a comprehensive listing of elaborate holiday displays in the Valley and beyond.

Got a good column idea? Or maybe you're just curious about something around town. Send your ideas or questions to Zoe Francis at zoe@zoeFrancis.com or call (925) 461-1170. Letters may be sent to 4770 Willow Road, Pleasanton, CA 94588.