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Tuesday » December 10 » 2002

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- » [Global Vancouver](#)
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- » [Global Sunday](#)

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 - [Sports Events](#)
 - [Live Music](#)
 - [Movies](#)
 - [Restaurants & Bars](#)
- » [Contests](#)
- » [Forums](#)

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STORY

How much are those blue lights in the window?

Joanne Blain

Vancouver Sun

Tuesday, December 10, 2002

All the green in the world won't buy you a blue Christmas.

If your heart is set on the hottest thing in holiday lights, the eye-catching strings of textured blue bulbs featured in the windows of many Vancouver retailers, forget it. They're not for sale anywhere.

B.C. Hydro has given the energy-efficient lights to business improvement associations throughout B.C., which have passed them on to retailers to test-drive before they hit the market here.

No one imagined they would spark such wild interest.

"People like them because they are different, and they like the texture of the bulbs, and I think they're ready for something new," said Sarah Pley of Rieva and Reine, a bed linen and giftware store on South Granville.

"I think they are the hottest thing since icicle lights," said Sharon Townsend of the South Granville Business Improvement Association. "Some merchants have been getting 10 or 15 inquiries a day."

It's a frustrating experience both for shoppers and sales clerks, who have to keep telling customers that they can't have the one thing that has caught their fancy.

"We're fed up with having to explain to people that they can't buy them," said Bob Mochrie of Sicklemore's Flowers on South Granville.



Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun / Sarah Pley of Rieva and Reine on Granville shows off energy-efficient blue lights.

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"We could have sold dozens and dozens and dozens."

It's the same story at the Plum clothing store at Granville and 12th.

"Man, if we had them, we could have sold them 20 times over," said Dana Dixon, the store's assistant manager.

The cool blue strands use a light-emitting diode rather than the traditional incandescent filament, which means they use far less energy and don't get hot.

"They are new technology that is not available in retail yet in B.C.," said Barbara Broughton of B.C. Hydro's Power Smart program.

Hydro is always on the lookout for energy-efficient alternatives to existing products, Broughton said, and found the Christmas lights through a U.S. company that had them made in China. "We literally got the last 20,000 strings they produced last year."

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The good news, she said, is the lights will be in stores next year at an estimated retail price of about \$20 a string in a variety of shapes and colours, including orange and purple.

They use about 90 per cent less electricity than standard Christmas lights, Broughton said. For example, the average cost of burning six strings of standard lights for about a month over the Christmas season is about \$26.46, she said, compared to 30 cents for six strings of LED lights.

The new lights also have an impressive life expectancy of 20 years, she said.

In addition to retailers, Broughton said B.C. Hydro has also supplied the lights to such organizations as St. Paul's Hospital, Van Dusen Gardens and the Stanley Park burn fund.

Townsend said the strands were an instant hit when the business association offered them to South Granville stores.

"People thought they were really cool," she said. "Initially they were enamoured with the colour, and then when they found out they are low-energy, that clinched the deal for them."

The association plans to hold a window display contest in the week before Christmas to judge who has made the most creative use of the lights.

As for the wisdom of getting people excited about a new product before they can actually buy it, the jury is still out.

"I'm not sure if it was a good idea or not," Townsend said with a laugh.

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