



TODAY'S LIFESTYLE



## Electric fireplaces capture the mood without the mess

[By Mary James]

Residents of some of the toniest downtown high-rises may find it hard to take their eyes off spectacular views of city lights and autumn sunsets. But when they share an intimate moment with friends, chances are good that the fireplace they gather around will be electric.

These hearths, with their realistic flames and designer-style surrounds, have come a long way since their invention in England more than five decades ago. And while sales lag well behind those of wood- and gas-burning models, their popularity is growing, especially in warm climates.

"In 2006, electric fireplaces had the largest sales jump of any category, up 20% over the previous year," said Deidra Darsa, media relations manager for the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association, an industry group based in Arlington, Va.

"The reasons are simple - they go anywhere, are easy to install and are maintenance-free."

Unlike wood-burning and most gas fireplaces, models with internal electric heaters require no venting because there is no combustion and thus no combustion byproducts. That's a big plus, especially in areas of the country where wood-burning fireplaces have been outlawed to reduce air pollution.

As a result, electric fireplaces slip easily into condos, mobile homes and RVs, as well as upstairs bedrooms, home offices, dens and guest houses. New waterproof models are at home on balconies, decks or patios.

Plus, they are a snap for do-it-yourselfers.

"What makes them revolutionary is that they are completely plug and play," says

Lori Hall, marketing manager for Twin Star International, a Florida company that makes ClassicFlame electric fireplaces and Trefanti Fashion Bath Furniture.

"You take the mantelpieces out of the box, put in the insert, plug it in and you're ready to go. There are no permits required or worries about odors or emissions."

What transforms an electric heater into a fireplace is equally simple, on the surface.

"You remember the scene in 'The Wizard of Oz' where they pull back the curtain to reveal the short little wizard? The workings of the electric fireplace are somewhat like that," says Hall, with a laugh. "At its heart are three standard 40-watt candelabra bulbs. If they go out, you just go to the store to replace them."

But how light from those bulbs realistically simulates flickering flames and glowing embers is proprietary, or patented technology, at Twin Star and other companies.

Without getting too specific, Hall says the light reflects off a rotating tube with flanges through a fireplace-shaped metal screen to a display panel. "It's all optical illusion, but one that we have refined so that it is fantastically real looking," she says.

Realistic flames are "what's driven this business forward," notes Martyn Champ, president of Dimplex, one of a large family

of companies headquartered in Ireland that specializes in all types of electric heating.

"The original electric fireplaces in England just had a bar in the front that seemed to glow, like the coal fires they replaced. But this wasn't appealing in other countries, so we designed a product with an imitation log bed. The breakthrough came with technology that created the flame and then made it appear to come from between two logs."

Dimplex's patented "Multi-fire" firebox also includes hand-crafted logs lit internally with LED lights to simulate burning logs, "pulsing" embers and a slow start and fade out "so it doesn't just go out like a light bulb when you switch it off," Champ says.

Some Dimplex models also have efficient built-in air purifiers. Research is ongoing industry wide to add sparks and the classic snaps, crackles and pops wood makes when it burns. "To date, the sound has been more like radio static, which is guaranteed to ruin the whole experience," Champ says.

"Eighty percent of the people who have a fireplace have it for aesthetics rather than heat," he adds. "It's a focal point, a gathering spot. The random flame of an electric fireplace is better than that of most gas models, and it's certainly more efficient."

Cost to run an electric fireplace without the heater is pennies a day - about 3 cents an hour, Champ and Hall agree. Add a 1.5-kw, variable speed heater, which can take the



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chill off about 400 to 600 square feet, and the cost is about 25 cents an hour. Gas models generally cost more to operate, depending on size and price per therm of gas. Energy experts put the cost at 50 cents per hour.

Costs of the electric units with mantels, depending on size, start at \$400 to \$500 and top out between \$1,800 and \$2,000. Builder-installed inserts that fit into a wall and are hard-wired to a thermostat or switch generally are around \$1,000. Mantel styles abound. Twin Star's ClassicFlame models offer mantels that range from classic to contemporary, with a choice of sizes (18 to 50 inches wide), finishes, woods and furniture details like hand-carved accents. The company, which also makes furniture, has created mantels that coordinate with Ashley Furniture's Casa Molina line and Aspen Home's Young Classic and Napa collections.

This year, Twin Star meshed an electric fireplace and home entertainment center. In its Southern California entertainment centers, the fireplace insert is surrounded by storage cabinets and shelves for audio-video components. On top is a ledge for a 42- to 66-inch-wide flat-panel television.

"These are very efficient for small-space living," Hall says of the units, priced between \$1,400 and \$2,500 (television not included).

Dimplex, which has placed its products in many Southern California condominium high-rises, is currently expanding to include outdoor models.

"These are purely decorative - no heat," Champ says. "They are completely waterproof with a stainless steel box, and most operate on 12 volts, the same as your garden lighting. Some even have built-in

sound systems. We've been having a lot of success with them.

"The largest weighs over 400 pounds and sells for \$1,699. It really looks majestic on a deck or patio."

The company also is focused on contemporary-styled wall-mounted models that add ambience but no heat. "These are ideal for bedrooms and condos where space is an issue," Champ says.

Dimplex products are available online at [www.electricfireplaces.com](http://www.electricfireplaces.com).

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