

Fall • 2006 • a Danville Weekly publication

Home & garden

What an idea

Innovations feel right at home on Alamo hillside

INSIDE

When in drought

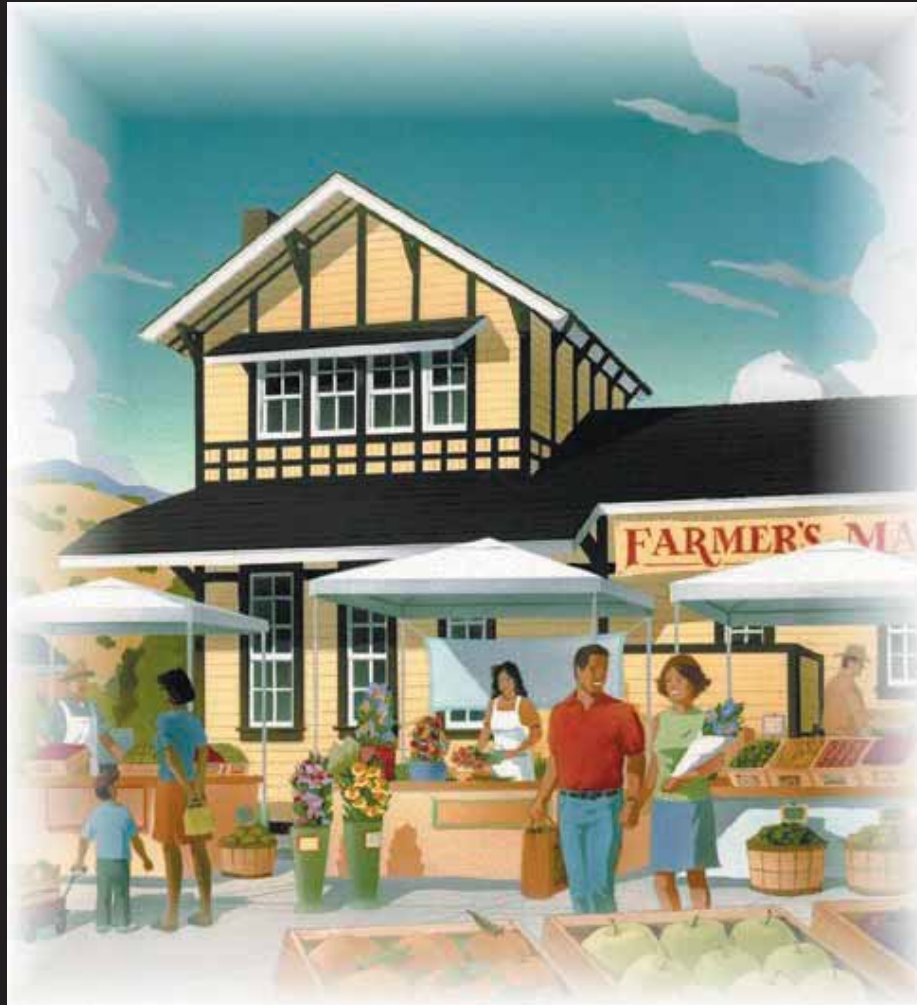
Remember the heat wave when designing your yard

Lowering fuel bills

Tankless water heaters are starting to get the spotlight



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Home & garden

Fall is a season of change and of beauty

After surviving record-hot temperatures this summer, many of us are making plans for gardens that need less water and homes that are better insulated against the heat, the cold—and high PG&E bills. In this special section, we offer advice from a Danville nursery on what plants will thrive in local gardens and how to care for them. We also take a tour of the Sunset Magazine Idea House, which was conveniently (for us) built in Alamo this year. We found it a wonderful place to visit, whether one is looking for ideas or not. This issue also presents information on tankless water heaters, another way to lower energy bills.

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Editor: Dolores Fox Ciardelli

Art Director: Shannon Corey

On the cover: The great room of the Sunset Magazine Idea House uses the simplicity of white walls and hanging lamps to create a major focal point at the Alaskan cedar fireplace with a contemporary painting hanging above. Photo by Shannon Corey.

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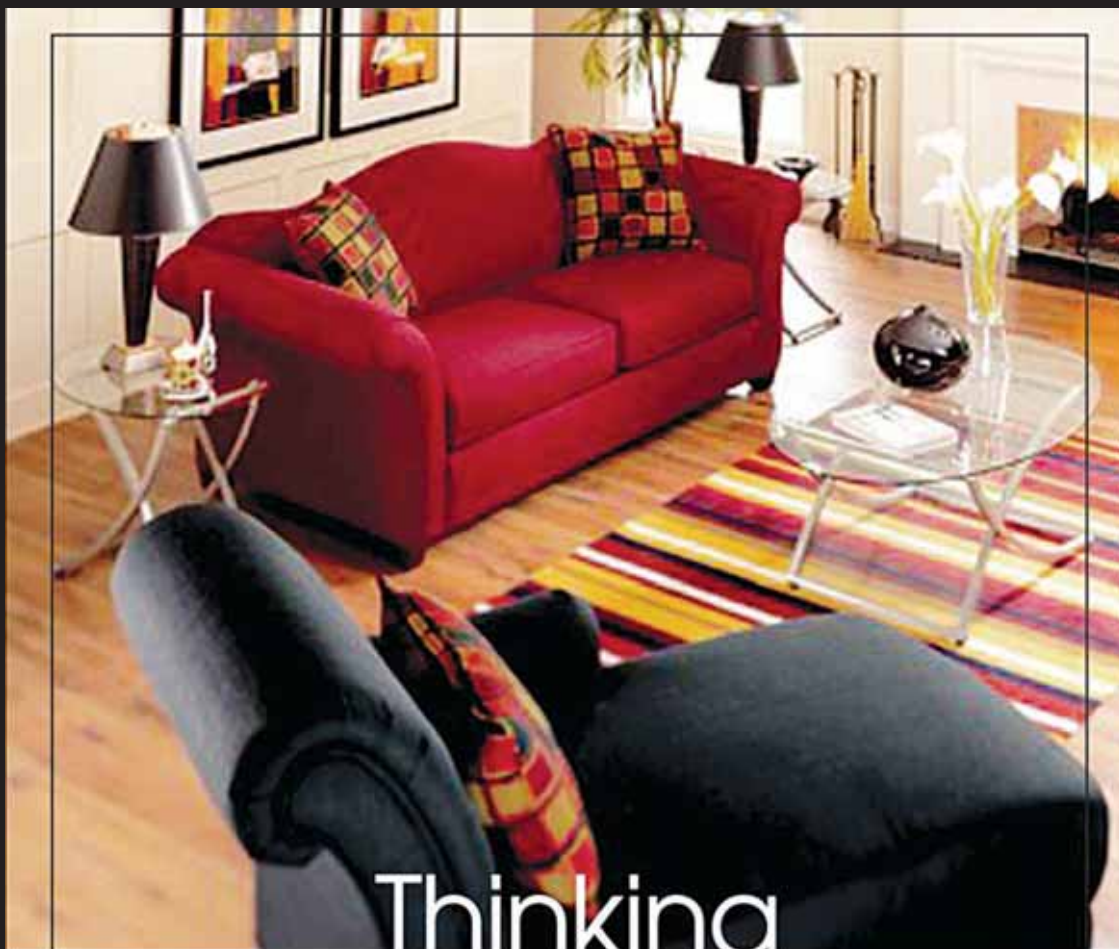
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Geoff Gillette

Ceanothus is native to California and drought tolerant, which makes it a good starting plant when planning a garden.

When in drought

Remember the heat wave when designing your yard

by Geoff Gillette

As the hot days of summer begin to cool in preparation for the rainy winter months, homeowners looking to plant bushes and flowers may want to give some thought to the shrubbery with the best chance of long-term survival. During the very hot summer this year, many people saw their plants wither and die or saw huge water bills as they tried to keep their plants alive.

There is a better way to plan for the heat without resorting to constant watering. Michael Anderson, manager of Sloat's Nursery in Danville, said that putting in the right type of plant can give your landscaping a much better chance of surviving triple digit heat without bloating your water bill.

"You want to pick plants that are appropriate to your area," he said, "and California, more than anywhere in the world, has a huge selection of native plants that are good ornamentals."

Anderson suggests when planning your landscape to start with Ceanothus.

"There are a lot of different types, and they are native to California and very drought tolerant," he explained. "Ceanothus are some of the most ornamental plants you'll find in the nursery."

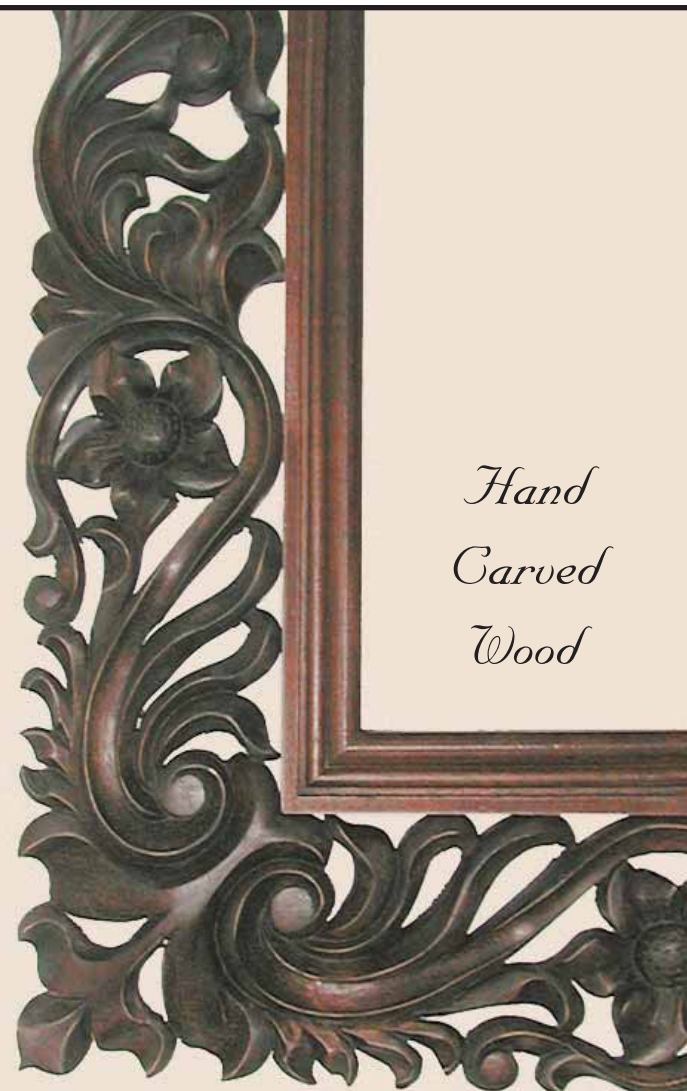
Other plants he suggested were a low-growing Manzanita or a California Fuchsia, both of which have little need for supplemental water once established. Another such plant is the Pacific Coast Iris.

"This is one of the most beautiful wildflowers and they thrive in our environment," he said.

Anderson said you don't have to limit yourself to just plants from California. "This is a Mediterranean climate that gives you access to plants from South Africa, Chile and the Mediterranean. Anything from those regions will work."

Bulbs are a good way to go. Anderson said bulbs are very drought tolerant. Homeowners can plant daffodils and irises, both available now. These perennials add a lot of color, along with being tough

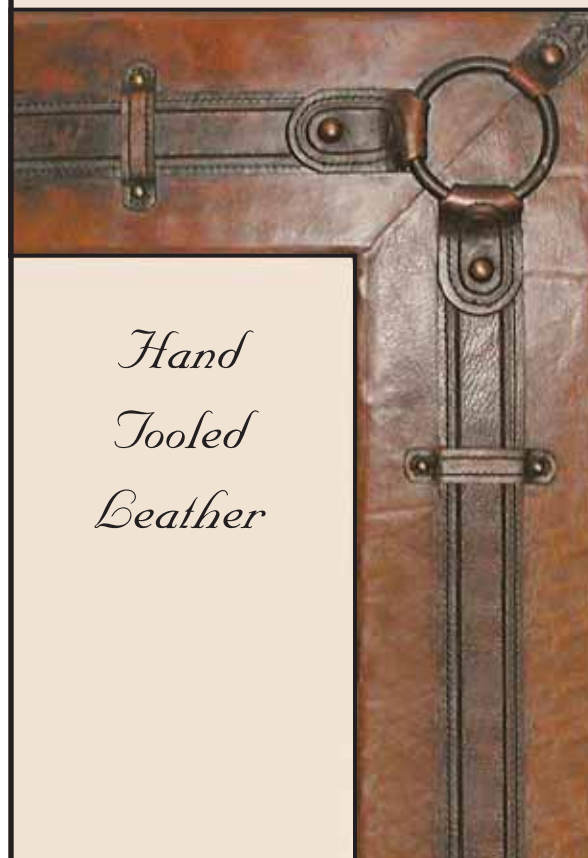
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Geoff Gillette

Michael Anderson, manager of Sloat's Nursery in Danville, says California has a huge selection of native plants that are good ornamentals.

When in drought

► Continued from page 5

enough to withstand the upper ranges of heat seen here in June and July.

If you have used native plants in your landscaping and you're still seeing a lot of damage in the heat there are a couple of possibilities as to why it's happening.

"A lot of the time, plants could be damaged by improper watering," said Anderson. "When it's hot, people think they need to water every day. Instead they should be giving plants water less often but more thoroughly."

Anderson said that ideally you should give your plants an inch of water once a week.

"The best way to do it is to put a cup on your lawn or near your plants. Water until you see a half inch in the cup. Then stop, wait an hour and water again."

Anderson said watering in this way will let the water sink down lower and get into the root system. Which, in turn, makes the plants stronger and allows them to better survive harsher temperatures.

Those with irrigation systems can conduct similar tests. Using the cup, run your sprinklers for a set amount of time to determine how long it takes to do an inch and then set your timers accordingly.

In addition, knowing when to water is crucial.

"I'm always surprised when I'm driving down the street at noon and I see people's sprinklers running," Anderson said. "With the sun directly overhead, that water is evaporating before it can do the plants any good."

Getting a light coating of water on plants in the midday sun can also lead to burning or scorching of your plant life. Anderson recommends watering either late in the evening or early in the morning.

"That way the water has a chance to get down to the roots before the sun

comes up and begins the evaporation process."

Another tip Anderson gives is to be sure to group plants with similar needs so that you can water them accordingly.

"Don't put your Mediterraneans and your tropicals together," he said. "They have different needs."

If you have the room in your yard, Anderson recommends planting an oak tree, both to give shade for your more delicate greenery but also for the beauty it adds to your property.

"It's the symbol of Danville. They create such a majestic feel on your property. I think California oaks are some of the most beautiful trees in the world," he said.

If you have plants that have been damaged, Anderson recommends changing the environment.

"If you think they can be saved, dig them up and put them in a container," he said. "Then move the container into a shaded area and give it plenty of water. If it comes back, you may need to rethink where you have it in your landscape plan before planting it again."

For potted plants, give them plenty of water and move them to shaded areas during the hottest days. Anderson also said that using glazed pottery instead of terracotta can help with water retention.

If you are thinking about putting in new landscaping or just replacing plants throughout your yard, now is the time.

"Fall is the appropriate time to plant. Pretty much now through November," Anderson said. "Nurseries get visited in spring when everything's in bloom, but if you want to give your plants a head start and develop a strong root system, fall is the best time."

Anderson said that anyone with questions about what to plant and how best to maintain landscaping should visit a local nursery, such as Sloat's and ask questions.

"If someone is thinking about planting an environmentally friendly garden they should come down and talk to us," he said. ■

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what an

IDEA

Innovations feel right at home on Alamo hillside

story by Natalie O'Neill

photos by SF



The library dining room is set up as a multi-functional room for dining and social gatherings.



Textured glass is used throughout the house, covering the tops of the built-in wall shelving and is featured in the dining room. The close-up shows the details of the textured glass.



Soon enough, your home will barely need you. It will know what water pressure you use in the shower, the room acoustics you prefer for your dinner parties, and the exact temperature you keep your pinot noir.

Curious about the home of the future? Try taking a tour of Sunset Magazine's Idea House in Alamo. These technologies along with other mind-blowing home innovations are showcased along with progressive interior design every weekend until Nov. 12.

"The whole point is to try out new ideas," said Sunset Magazine spokeswoman Shannon Thompson.

West Coast home and garden experts have teamed with Popular Science Magazine to exhibit and eventually sell the 6,500-square-foot, \$5.5 million house built by De Mattei construction. Visitors can learn about and test out latest trends in home appliances, home automation, and interior furnishing.

A robotic lawn mower, a home amphitheater and a 1,100-bottle wine vault organized with computer software are just some of the home ideas to awe visitors.

Some technology may be impersonal, but here, the house isn't built around the technology—technology is built around the house. And, as the interior designer Patricia McDonald puts it, the home is contemporary but not cold.

"You can come in and be comfortable.



A six-inch touch screen controls the heat and music throughout the entire house.

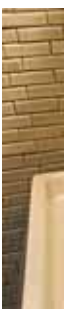
All the technology is transparent," said McDonald, who runs McDonald and Moore Interior Design company out of San Jose.

Even with its size, the house exudes a warm feeling, she says. Built on former ranchland at Alamo Springs Drive, the site caters to the equestrian lifestyle of Alamo. The builders understand the needs of residents in the area, says Douglas Spooner, director of operations at De Mattei.

The multi-functional room

Designers and techies who set up the idea house recognize that the American family isn't what it used to be. New home

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Shannon Corey



Detail oriented interior design by Patricia McDonald makes the house as aesthetic as it is innovative.



A modern but-warm kitchen complete with automated skylight shades, a specially made kitchen counter computer, and state of the art cooking appliances.



...ured on the staircase banister.



This phototropic energy saving light has outside light-sensitive material that allows "petals" to open when the light is on and close when it's off.

Left: Home office is sleek and functional.



...pours straight from the mirror in a room of the home of the future.

... is located next to the home office and can easily be transformed into a meeting area for clients. The bed quickly folds up into seating spaces and opens the room. Now more than ever, successful entrepreneurs and engineers are coming out of the home. Adjustments

like these make the at-home office comfortable and functional. "Everybody in California wants flexible living," Spooner said. The dining room library is also multi-functional in its use. With lighting adjustments it can be used for casual business meetings, formal dinner parties, or just a quiet place to curl up with a novel. In this day and age, the living room is becoming obsolete, McDonald said.

Every room in the idea house can be thought of as the living room. "We think it's a failure if people don't think they can use the whole space," she said.

The automated ambiance

In every room, music, heat and lighting are monitored by small, out of the way computers that allow the owner to

adjust the ambiance of the entire house. The lighting is controlled by radio frequency and can even be turned on from inside the car. "This technology is extremely easy to use," said Kevin Vawter of Pro Home Systems, as he whizzed through the six-inch computer system with the touch of his finger. "You can hear music in any room of the house—even out by the pool," he explained. Monitoring heat and light through

► Continued on page 10

VISIT THE IDEA HOUSE • Tours of the Sunset Magazine Idea House cost \$12 general; \$8 seniors; and are free for children under 5. Visitors must take a shuttle from Sycamore Valley Road park-and-ride. Tours run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Fridays through Sundays, now through Nov. 12.

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The kid's loft features the X-Box 360, a virtual racer and a 50-inch plasma television and other cutting edge entertainment technology. Water feature, below, is visible from the wine room.

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Idea house

► Continued from page 9

technology also helps save time and energy. Owners are more apt to be aware of energy use in rooms that aren't occupied, Vawter said.

The show stoppers

All of the technology is fascinating at the idea house, but some rooms are the stars of the show.

For computer and technology lovers, nothing seems more surreal than the plastic prototype printer located in the tech room.

This machine creates virtually anything made of plastic. Users type in the rendering data for what they want made—a water bottle, a figurine, a coaster—and hours later the machine produces it in three dimension. At the size of a small refrigerator, the contraption is like something out of a science fiction movie.

Also on the list of jaw-droppers is a \$35,000 wine vault that organizes and stores more than a thousand wines in temperature-appropriate pockets. A computer screen-sized electronic organizer helps wine connoisseurs decide what to drink and remember what they have already used.

For those who want to relax in front of a movie, the amphitheater is the place to go. A light projector hits the 112-inch screen, and sound from the speakers pours out from behind the screen just like a real movie theater. The acoustics in this room are thought out so carefully that even the hanging art on the wall contributes to the rich sound.

The 6,500-foot piece of art

McDonald talks about the interior of the house like it's one giant painting with each section gorgeously thought out.

"Don't these tiles look like a flash flood in the desert?" she asked, pointing toward the textured, almost liquid-looking tiles in one of the four bathrooms.

As you enter the house, warm coloring in the entrance hall illuminates the hallway with an inviting glow. Carefully placed paintings and modern-but-classic furniture add depth





The master bedroom offers sweeping views of the hills and epitomizes the house style, which is contemporary but not cold.

to large rooms.

The great room (the closest thing to a living room) uses the simplicity of white walls and hanging lamps to create a major focal point at the fireplace, which draws your eye to the yellow and blue oil painting that hangs above.

“We mixed old and new together,” McDonald said of the Venetian plaster and Alaskan cedar fireplace.

The dining room/library uses the same minimalist approach to make the room vibrant, but relaxed. Painting one wall a shade of eggplant purple and leaving the rest white brings importance to that area of the room, explained McDonald.

“People are drawn to this room,” she said.

McDonald performed other wonders with paint as well, introducing a clever perception trick that interior designers will likely catch on to and gobble up. When painting a room, she often uses one shade lighter on some walls to give the illusion that the room is getting more light than it actually is.

The kitchen, the kids loft, the exercise room and the outdoor pool are also laid out with style that makes every room accessible and unique.

“There are so many cookie cutter homes, but this is custom made. There’s something for everyone,” Thompson said. ■



The master bath has glass walls surrounding the whirlpool tub and a shower programmed for the perfect bathing experience for everyone in the house.



The house features an indoor-outdoor flow with huge sliding glass doors opening out to the swimming pool from the great room.

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#02

A tankless task

Tankless water heaters starting to get the spotlight

by Geoff Gillette

In these days of higher fuel costs and greater environmental awareness, a method of heating water for home use is starting to become more prevalent.

Many homeowners are replacing their big-tank-in-the-garage water heaters with a tankless version that has a much higher energy efficiency.

With a tankless heater, when the hot water is turned on the water enters the heater, the burner ignites, the water is run through a heating coil and then out the tap and into the sink or shower. When the water is turned off, the unit shuts down.

Tankless water heater expert David Shevick works throughout the Bay Area installing the devices and praising their effectiveness.

"Tankless heaters are starting to come back into vogue here in the U.S.," he said.

One reason the heaters haven't been fully embraced here is the price, he added.

"A tank heater can be put in for \$800, while a tankless can cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$3,000 installed," he said.

While prices have not come down much in the past few years, companies like Takagi and Bosch have begun to manufacture larger capacity heaters that can handle the larger residences in this area.

According to figures given on Shevick's Web site www.tanknot.com a family of four using an average of 120 gallons of water daily could save as much as \$218 per year. Shevick said that is due to the much higher energy efficiency of the tankless heater.

"With a tank heater, you're losing energy constantly," he explained. "The pilot lot is always on, the tank needs to be reheated periodically even when you're on vacation, and the tank isn't really designed to prevent heat loss. The tankless heater comes on when you turn on the hot water and heats it right then. You have an endless supply of hot water without losing a lot of energy."

Figures provided by Shevick show that the average new water heater has an energy efficiency of 60 percent, dropping down to the low 50s after a few years. A tankless heater has an efficiency of 85 percent.

Interest in the tankless heaters is growing in the San Ramon Valley area. Wayne Lawton, sales manager at Just Water Heaters Inc., said the company has seen a real rise in popularity.

"A few years ago we were doing one or two a year. Now we're averaging about a half dozen per week," Lawton said.

He noted that high fuel costs are only part of the driving force behind the renewed interest.

"The industry has been pushing awareness of tankless water heaters. The more people know about them, the more we are installing."

Both Lawton and Shevick agree that the energy efficiency and longevity of the units will allow the average homeowner to recoup the additional cost over time. A tank-based heater will need to be replaced in about 12 years, while a tankless will go around 30. The environmentally friendly heaters garner their owners a \$300 federal tax credit as well. When you add the ben-

"The tankless heater comes on when you turn on the hot water and heats it right then. You have an endless supply of hot water without losing a lot of energy."

efit of never running out of hot water in the middle of a shower you can see why interest is rising.

While the majority of work Lawton sees is in retrofitting a home for a new unit, there is a growing market in the area of new home building as well. Builder John Laing Homes has begun utilizing tankless water heaters in its new communities. Officials said that the number of tankless heaters they put into a community depends on the size of the home. In general, they are going into the smaller homes to handle the load more easily. As companies like Takagi continue to build heaters with a greater peak flow load, they will be installed in larger homes.

Danville resident Paul Mees is quite familiar with tankless heaters. A native of Holland, Mees grew up with the devices.

"They are really quite wonderful," he said. "When I first came to America and saw a tank heater I couldn't figure out what it was or why it was there."

Mees and wife Ginny are currently building a home in Italy, which will have tankless water heaters.

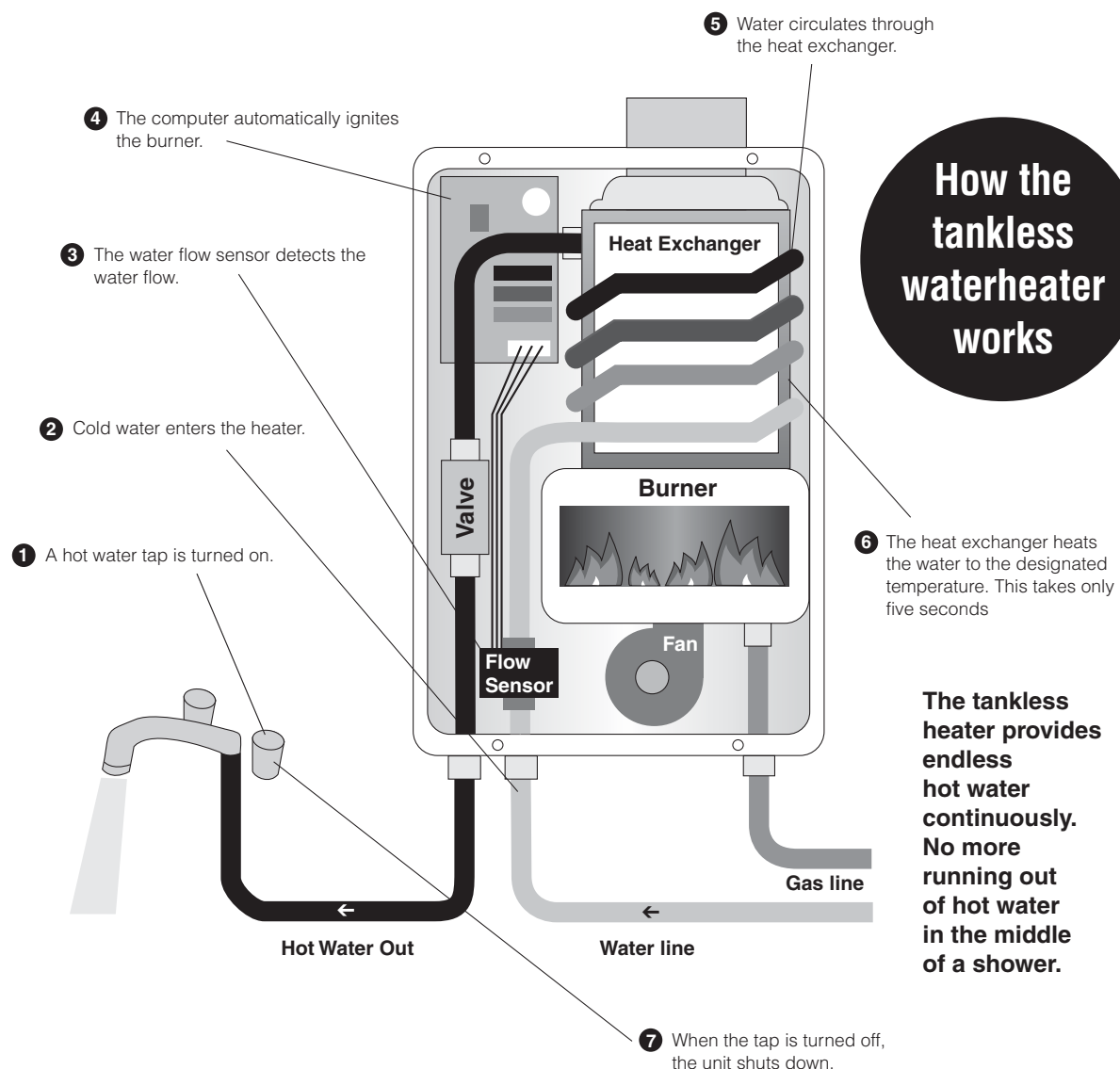
For the do-it-yourselfers there are things to be concerned about when putting in the heaters. Lawton emphasized that you need to carefully read the installation and safety materials.

"We get people who go to a home improvement store, buy a unit, and install it themselves. If they aren't careful and install them correctly they could create an extremely dangerous situation for themselves."

Lawton said installers who don't put in the correct flue to vent the system can allow carbon monoxide to leak out and create a hazard in the home. Also using the wrong size gas line can cause the unit to malfunction due to a buildup of particles and soot.

Persons interested in having a tankless heater installed should approach it carefully. Make sure you buy a unit that can handle the peak flows in your home so you'll be able to, for instance, run the dishwasher while two people take showers.

Knowing exactly what you're going to need is more than half the battle. Getting an estimate from a qualified installer is the safest bet. ■



5 Water circulates through the heat exchanger.

4 The computer automatically ignites the burner.

3 The water flow sensor detects the water flow.

2 Cold water enters the heater.

1 A hot water tap is turned on.

How the tankless waterheater works

6 The heat exchanger heats the water to the designated temperature. This takes only five seconds

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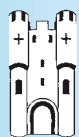


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Feeding our feathered friends

Fish and Game urging residents to keep bird feeders disease free

The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is encouraging California residents to take additional steps to keep bird feeders clean. An outbreak of mycoplasmosis, a disease affecting finches, but not humans, was recently discovered in the Danville/Alamo area.

"Weekly cleaning of bird feeders must be done to minimize the risk of spreading the disease among finches and other birds," said Dr. Pam Swift, a DFG wildlife veterinarian.

Mycoplasmosis is a bacteria-like disease that has been discovered for the first time in wild finches in California. Affected birds develop an eye infection that may lead to blindness and breathing difficulties. Birds may then rub their heads on branches and feeders, increasing the risk of spreading the disease. The types of feeders that force birds to stick their heads inside are especially problematic because the birds' eyes come into direct contact with the sides of the tubes.

To help control the disease, DFG biologists are urging residents to begin aggres-

sively cleaning bird feeders weekly by using a 10 percent solution of household bleach in water. The feeders should be completely dried before adding new food. Other suggestions include:

- Clean up old food around feeders on a regular basis.
- Spread small amounts of seed over a large area in the sun, instead of using bird boxes or feeders. Also, vary the location of seeds to avoid encouraging a concentration of birds at one site.
- Replace wooden bird feeders with plastic or metal ones, as wood harbors disease organisms and cannot be sanitized as effectively.
- Use gloves when handling dead birds and bird feeders, and wash hands with anti-bacterial soap when finished.

Residents are encouraged to take these added steps at least through the end of May, while those who enjoy bird feeding should continue the practice of regular bird feeder cleaning, up to a weekly interval, outside of this outbreak.

—SPM Wire

Use sense for ladder safety

It's that time of year again, when homeowners scramble up ladders to clean gutters, install storm windows and cut branches on trees. That is why the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) is advising people to take proper safety precautions to reduce the chance of falling or having other ladder-related accidents.

While ladders aid many household chores, accidents are more common than one realizes. Frequent injuries include cuts, bruises and fractures.

Approximately 200,000 people were treated in hospital emergency rooms for ladder-related injuries in 2005, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

"Knowing how to properly use and set-up a ladder can significantly reduce the possibility of being involved in a ladder-related accident, such as falling," said Richard F. Kyle, President of AAOS. "It is essential that ladders are placed on firm, level surfaces and that the weight the ladders support doesn't exceed the maximum load capacity."

Staying safe on a ladder can be made easier if you follow these tips developed by the AAOS:

- Inspect the ladder. Check for any loose screws, hinges or rungs that might not have been fixed from its last use. Clean off any mud or liquids that might have accumulated.
- Properly set up the ladder. Place on a firm, level surface. Never place a ladder on ground that is uneven and watch for soft, muddy spots. The same is true for uneven flooring. Remember to always engage the ladder locks or braces before climbing. If working outside, make sure the ladder - when extended - will not hit electrical wires, tree limbs or other obstructions.
- Remember the one-to-four rule: The bottom of the ladder

Avoid a fall this autumn when working around the house

should be one foot away from the wall for every four feet the ladder rises. If you're going to climb onto a roof, the ladder should extend at least three feet higher than the rooftop. And, the upper and lower sections of an extension ladder should overlap to provide stability.

- Do not use a ladder or its pail shelf as a seat between tasks.
- Select the right ladder for the job. If you're washing windows inside the home, choose a step stool or utility ladder. Extension ladders are ideal outdoors to reach high places, like gutters or the rooftop.

- Move materials with caution when on the ladder. While cleaning the garage or closet, be careful when moving items on shelves. It's easy to be thrown off balance and fall.

- Always position the ladder closer to the work. Over-reaching or leaning too far can make you lose your balance and fall. Your bellybutton should not go beyond the sides of the ladder!

- Wear proper footwear. Make sure your shoelaces are tied and the soles of your shoes are free of debris or greasy or wet substances. Do not wear leather-soled shoes, as they are slippery! Pant legs shouldn't be too wide or too long.

- Be careful when climbing; get help if you need it. Ask someone to hold the ladder while you climb. Stay in the center of the ladder as you ascend, and always hold side rails with both hands. Also, make sure only one person climbs the ladder at a time.

For additional safety tips, visit the Academy's Web sites at www.aaos.org or www.orthoinfo.org, or call (800) 824-BONES (824-2663).

—SPM Wire



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