

Firefighters urge caution with candles

Candle fires typically skyrocket in December.

When he was a college student, Dan Riley was home alone in his parents' house one day when he heard a "pop." Confused, he walked around to investigate the sound's source.

The Osceola resident found a fire in an upstairs bathroom started by a candle his sister had left burning after her shower, igniting a bottle of perfume nearby on the counter.

"I walked in, and flames had shot up the vanity and were going up the whole side of the wall," Riley said. "I was able to put the fire out, but had I been gone, the house would have burned to the ground."

The pleasant aroma and festive ambiance candles create fuels an annual \$2 billion retail industry but also prompts fire prevention agencies to encourage caution, particularly in the winter.

Candle fires more than double during December, according to the National Fire Prevention Association. Christmas Day typically sees the most candle fires of the year, with New Year's Day and Christmas Eve a close second and third. Reported home candle fires have more than tripled in the past 15 years, and the association selected "Use Candles with Care" as the theme for this year's fire prevention week. The holidays are more dangerous because festive celebrants use more candles than at other times of the year, according to the National Fire Prevention Association, which also blames more flammable materials -- such as wrapping paper -- lying around on the holidays.

Candles add to a long list of safety concerns that pile up during the winter for local firefighters, who have braced themselves for a busy season with more people using alternative heating methods.

Although several candles have been recalled over the past years, especially those with lead wicks, consumer misuse causes 85 percent of candle fires. Half of home candle fires occurred when combustible material came too close to the flame, and nearly a fifth sprung from those left unattended.