

WHERE THE TREETOPS GLISTEN



PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER BARTH

This year, there are 52 lighted trees on Robert Gerber's property in Mendham, one for each year since 1948, when Gerber came to the United States from Switzerland. "A lot of people take photographs," he says, "and some leave notes in the mailbox."

A Holiday Light Display, Swiss Style

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That Robert A. Gerber covers one more tree with lights each holiday season than he did the year before is not readily apparent. After all, what's one more lighted tree to a hillside full of lighted trees?

Still, it hasn't escaped the notice of people who drive along Route 24 in Mendham every holiday season that there are many more lighted trees there today than there used to be.

There are 52, to be exact — one for each year since 1948, when Gerber emigrated from Switzerland to make America his home. If he became an American, though, he didn't leave his Swiss instinct for order back in the Alps. He planned this enterprising display with the precision of a Swiss watch before he even broke ground for the chalet-style home back in 1969, when he moved to Mendham.

Whereas most people building a house are preoccupied with such routine electrical concerns as the number of outlets per room and whether one spotlight will be sufficient to illuminate the walkway between garage and back door, Gerber was thinking Christmas lights.

"To decorate a tree is very easy," he says. "The hard part is where to plug it in. So I made sure I had plugs every 200 feet."

Some of us are old enough to remember when municipalities cornered the market on holiday displays, when local governments were the only entities with the means, space and inclination to set out an impressive array of giant candy canes, toy soldiers and creche figures around a huge tree covered with multicolored lights.

It was a ritual in my family — and in many others, I'm sure — for everyone to pile into the car a day or two before Christmas to cruise around looking at the lights. Back then, it was a surprise and a treat to come across those few homeowners who got into the spirit with lighted Santas perched atop chimneys, sleighs and reindeer on roofs or spotlighted wooden cutouts of carolers on front lawns.

Not today. Not after Tiny White Lights triggered the home display revolution. Where once you could count on the fingers of one hand the number of private residences with displays worth driving by, today the average street has two, three, six, maybe a dozen. This phenomenon was ratcheted up geometrically a few years ago with the unveiling of icicle lights — strands featuring not individual bulbs, but drippy strings of bulbs in various lengths.

The thing about icicle lights is that anyone can put them up. Unlike the single strings of

the past, they do not tangle. A few nails and — poof— they're strung across the length of a front porch or all along the roofline.

Indeed, icicle lights have given serious competition to municipal displays, and the one-upmanship they appear to have engendered among some property owners would suggest cash prizes await families who employ maximum footage. The other night, I passed a place where not only the house was framed with icicle lights, but also the garage, an outdoor shed and post-and-rail fence.

And yet, more is not always more. Sometimes less is more, which brings us back to the display on Robert Gerber's property adjacent to Sunrise Lake. With a long hillside sweeping up from a pond, he can light 52 trees and never have the display look cluttered or crowded. It's not an assault on the eyes.

"You'll notice there are no blinking lights," he says. "No colored lights, just white lights. In Switzerland, that's all you see."

Simple, perhaps, but enough to stop traffic. Route 24's narrow shoulders cannot accommodate pullovers, but a side street directly across from Gerber's property provides a safe vantage point from which to study the trees and their reflection in the man-made pond. Suffice it to say there's more parking there in December than in the other 11 months combined.

"A lot of people take photographs," he says, "and some leave notes in the mailbox. One couple said they came out here so they could get engaged by the trees."

Gerber, a grandfather of seven, turned the main house over to his daughter and her family about six years ago and moved into a smaller chalet closer to the road. At the end of this month, he'll turn his business over to his son.

But he will remain the tree man. "It doesn't look like I can retire from the trees," he says. "People won't let me."

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