

the sky's the limit

*Durable new
materials and
aerodynamic
designs make
flying a kite
fun again*



...that the kite
she made
between palm
trees in a
Willow Glen
neighborhood.

WHAT ARE your childhood kite memories? Maybe they're like mine: Kites that wouldn't fly at all or that rose to 50 feet and then spiraled to their deaths.

Or that lone pine tree in the middle of an otherwise clear park, waiting, licking its lips and lurching for the kite I'd spent all day cutting, pasting and folding from the Sunday funnies. My big brother screaming, "FASTER!" behind me as I ran, urging me closer to the pine's insatiable appetite, my kite's fate already sealed.

And me walking home, defeated and kite-less.

Maybe this is the year to shed those frustrating kite memories. Be encouraged: The hobby is much different than it was when I was a kid.

Kites have come a long way in the last couple of decades. Instead of simple box kites or diamond-shaped designs that fight the wind, most modern kites are

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Story by Erin Barrett — Special to the Mercury News

aerodynamically designed to soar on top of the wind. Instead of flimsy paper or plastic, today's high-quality kites are built with lightweight but durable materials such as Mylar. It's the same stuff found in boat sails, built to resist damage in high winds and crashes, but also able to catch and hold the wind on its own, taking some of the pressure off you, the flier.

Even today's inexpensive plastic kites are structured better — easier to maneuver and easier to launch — than the ones you and I flew as kids. And the string is stronger, less likely to break.

OK, so you've got a windy afternoon and you're ready to give kiting another chance. Where do you begin? Walking into a kite store unprepared may leave you more bewildered by the choices. You'll still find the standard, Charlie Brown-style diamond kite, but you'll also find geometrical box kites, sled kites, ornate butterflies, birds, fish, serpents, dual-line, single-line. Which one is best for beginners or kids?

One expert, Tom McAlister of Highline Discount Sport Kites & Accessories in Berkeley, recommends a Mylar or cloth dragon, a kite that runs about \$10. Dragon kites have a long, colorful tail attached, come already assembled and are easy to launch and fly. They also look really cool up in the air. The only warning is that the long tail also makes them tend toward tangling, so watch them around trees, power lines, other kites and even their own strings.

If you're willing to spend more, you can get elaborate, well-flying kites for \$40 or more. Too much? It is possible to make your own kite, if you have the time, materials and patience. If this is your first time flying kites, you probably want to

Kiting is best enjoyed in open spaces without trees, power lines, or innocent bystanders.

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start with a good store-bought kite, but if you're feeling particularly adventuresome or creative, there are books at bookstores and most public libraries with patterns for building your own. Most longtime kite fliers recommend Margaret Greger's "Kites For Everyone" (out of print, but worth tracking down in used bookstores and libraries) as the best source of information for kite building.

How about those \$3.95 plastic drugstore kites? You can have success with them, but they're not a recommended choice simply because the material can tear if they dive-bomb and some of them don't fly well. Still, you're not risking a lot of money.

Coast is clear

So now you have your kite, but you need a place to fly it. Most experts say the closer to the coast you can get, the steadier the wind, and therefore the better your chances of flying. One of the very best places to fly a kite, and also the location for the biggest kite-flying event on the West Coast, is César Chávez Park at the Berkeley Marina. But in most of the Bay Area, inland winds are fine for kite flying. A beach or treeless field is best no matter what area you

choose to fly in. You need plenty of open space without houses, roads, innocent bystanders and especially power lines.

San Jose has tricky kite weather, but there are a few hints to having a successful day of flying in this area. Make sure the winds are heading south. Walls tend to block the necessary winds for flying, so use the 7-to-1 ratio when picking the best place to stand. If a wall is 10 feet, make sure you're at least 70 feet away before beginning, and you should be able to get a good launch.

A few words about safety and etiquette: Be courteous. Be thoughtful of other kite fliers. Never fly when it is storming. Never fly near telephone or electrical power lines. In urban areas, watch your line length. Flying a kite above 500 feet is prohibited because of air flight paths. Consider wearing gloves (kite line can easily cause burns and cuts, particularly in strong winds). Your kite may find itself magnetically drawn to a tree, so anticipate and avoid that fatal attraction. If you're flying a very valuable kite, you might even want to consider bringing a light ladder or other reaching/tree climbing devices. Never climb a tree unless you're positive it is strong enough to hold your weight. And *never* try to retrieve a kite from power lines.

OK, you're on the beach and it's clear of hazards. You take out your kite, tie on the string, and get ready to start running, right? Wrong!

The No. 1 misconception about kite flying is the "running start" fallacy. In theory, it makes sense: If there is little to no wind, running will produce some wind, and could quite possibly help launch an other-
wise stalled kite. In practice, though, the running start rarely works, it's likely to rip and mangle your kite and it isn't safe to be running palm-mall through a field or on a beach with eyes turned backward watching to see if the kite's flying or just dragging. Many a flier has sprained an ankle in a gopher hole or run full-speed into a bottlebrush plant or worse.

Launch preparation

Better to let the kite do its job, the wind do its job and you do yours — which is to hold onto the string in a leisurely way.

To launch your kite, stand with your back against the wind. Hold the kite up and gently let go. If there is almost no wind, someone can hold the kite up to 100 feet downwind. As you hold the line, wait for a gust, then reel in the line at the same time the kite is released. Let the wind do the work for you. As the kite rises, let out more line. Easy.

If the kite begins tugging, let out a little more line. If the kite is having

difficulty maintaining altitude, let out some line so that it begins to fall a bit. This gives the kite a chance to right itself and rise. Then quickly take in more line again, if necessary, until there is slight tension, then release more. Keep repeating the process until your kite has gained sufficient height.

If the kite begins to fall or circle in that kite-ritual suicidal death dive, don't pull the line in. Let out line so that the kite can catch the wind and right itself. If the kite and the wind and you are working together, the kite should flutter up into the sky and stay there nicely until it's time to reel it in.

When you begin pulling your kite in, do it slowly (the same way you launched your kite) with a series of gentle pulling and releasing steps until the kite floats closer and closer and lands (most preferably) in your hand without touching the ground. If your kite is balking — pulling and diving as it nears the ground — let go of the line when the kite is a few feet above the ground. It will float free and then land gently on the ground, preventing the damage that can happen with a power crash.

Crossed lines

Last word of advice: If your line gets crossed with another flier's line, don't panic! Walk toward each other slowly until the lines uncross. Otherwise, you'll spend more time unknotting than flying.

Erin Barrett is an Alameda freelance writer.

UPCOMING KITE EVENTS

There are some wonderful opportunities in the Bay Area to see the wide world of kiting — from miniature kites, to kite "dog fights" to traction kiting. Talk with the pros, visit with other hobbyists, explore the elements and history of kite flying, or just enjoy an event at the park with other kite lovers. Here's a sampling of upcoming kite events:

■ **San Ramon Art & Wind Festival:** Off of Bollinger Canyon Road in San Ramon, May 24-25. This is a bit smaller than the Berkeley Kite Festival, but will be quite a show this year. It includes acrobatic kites, artists, kite-making, synchronized ballet kite flying, kite show/demo, kite lessons and more. Hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. both days. Details: (530) 894-8137 or call Brian Champee at (510) 829-0683 for exact directions.

■ **Bay Area Sport Kite League Event:** Martin Luther King Park at the Old Berkeley Marina, June 20. Details: (510) 235-5483 or visit the web site at <http://www.skinner.com/baski/Calendar.html>.

■ **Berkeley Kite Festival and West Coast Championships:** Cesar Chavez Park at the Berkeley Marina in Berkeley, July 25-26. Begins at 10 a.m. both days and features free kite-making, a "candy drop," huge single-line kites, dual-line aerobatics, synchronized ballet kite flying. Details: (510) 525-2755.

■ **The Golden Gate Challenge:** Ocean Beach, right down from the Cliff House, San Francisco, Sept. 5-6. This annual attraction is primarily a sport-kite event, but is well-known and enjoyed throughout the area. Sponsored by the Northern California Kite Club. Details: (209) 831-4200.

KITE CLUBS

■ **Northern California Kite Club:** Offers regular clinics on kite flying and has information on kiting events all over Northern California. (209) 831-4200.

■ **Bay Area Sport Kite League:** Focus is primarily on sport kites, but meets for flying every month. Web site: <http://www.skinner.com/baski/Calendar.html> or call Dan Whitney or Brian Todd for further information at Gone With The Wind Kites (650) 594-1055.

■ **Lavender Wind Kite Club:** Monthly flying sessions (every second week) north of San Gregorio Beach. Clothing optional. Call Brian for more information: (510) 797-6997.