

A Guide to Good Firewood

By Jim Gillam

Firewood can be an economical and environmentally responsible fuel for comfortably heating your home.

Stored solar energy in the form of firewood has historically been humankind's most available and commonly used fuel. In North America, wood stoves, fireplace inserts and masonry heaters are popular as primary or supplemental heat sources for homes. Rising costs and occasional outages of conventional home heating energy sources have led to increased use of wood as a heating fuel. And many people just enjoy the comfort and ambience of a real wood fire on their hearth on a cold winter evening.

Advances in the technology of wood stoves and fireplaces mean that you may now enjoy the glow of a cozy fire and efficiently generate heat without creating a lot of smoke. Masonry heaters, using technology perfected over the centuries in northern Europe, are also finding favor in colder regions of North America as a method of providing a consistent level of heat in a living space while consuming minimal amounts of wood and emitting very little smoke.

To get the most enjoyment and warmth from your firewood, consider these suggestions.

What Type of Wood to Burn

Many articles and books about burning firewood contain charts listing heat values of various types of wood. And woodburners in some regions have prejudices for or against one species of wood or another. You really don't need to be concerned too much about that.

Whatever natural wood is available in your area is probably okay to use. Various species of wood, dried to the same moisture content, contain similar heat value per pound – from 5,500 to 8,500 BTU for air-seasoned wood. In general, dense hardwoods such as oak, hickory and sugar maple offer the most heating value per volume of wood. Softwoods such as various species of pine and fir tend to be lighter in weight per volume when dried, and thus offer less heat per volume of wood burned.

However, people in some extreme climates have only pine to burn and manage to heat their homes quite well. "Pitchy" or sappy pieces of pine should be discarded or exclusively split for kindling as cordwood size pieces may burn too hot and be difficult to control.

"I always tell people that the best firewood is free firewood and the second best is cheap firewood," says Ron Brigman, an experienced, certified chimney sweep in South Carolina who heats his home with wood. Firewood is a common use of dead, dying or unwanted trees and limbs.



Photo by Jeff Gitlin

If you have a choice, lighter woods can be used for fires when you "just want to take the chill off." Denser woods are preferable for long burn times.

Besides density, woods vary in other ways that affect their desirability as firewood. Ease of splitting, speed of drying and coaling qualities may be considerations if you have a choice of species to burn.

Painted or chemically treated woods should not be burned because they release toxic fumes.

Measure

Firewood is typically measured and sold by the cord, which is defined as 128 cubic feet of tightly stacked wood. A cord may be a 4' x 4' x 8' pile or anything that adds up to 128 cubic feet. Many states require that firewood sellers indicate the amount by multiples or fractions of a cord. It is a good idea to measure the wood while it is still on the truck to determine whether you are getting an honest cord.

Other commonly used but imprecise units of measurement include rick, face cord and truckload. Some states prohibit sale of firewood using these terms.

Preparation

The most important thing is that your wood be "seasoned," or dried to a moisture content below twenty percent. The drier the wood, the easier it ignites and the cleaner it burns.

Spring or summer is the best time to get your firewood in for winter. After you buy or gather your wood, you should split it and stack it under cover to allow it to air dry.

Firewood cut from fresh trees or trees recently infested by insects and disease can contribute to the spread of pests to nearby healthy trees. Gather firewood locally or buy your firewood from vendors who cut it locally to avoid transporting pests such as the emerald ash borer. Many jurisdictions prohibit transportation of firewood across their borders.

Wood piles naturally attract some insects and mice, so store firewood away from your house. Many communities have ordinances to guide you in storing your firewood.

Some wood may take over a year to dry. Dry, seasoned wood is cracked at the ends, is generally of a grayer color than fresh wood, and is much lighter in weight.

It's a good idea to stockpile enough wood so that you're a year ahead, putting up wood not only for the upcoming winter but for the following year. Supplies in some areas can be sporadic due to weather conditions, fire danger, or wood-cutting restrictions.

Your Chimney Sweep

Your chimney sweep is a good source of information about the firewood available in your area, and is ready to help you enjoy your winter fires. Again, preparation is the key. Your chimney sweep may be extremely busy throughout the autumn and winter months, so plan ahead and schedule an appointment in the spring or summer.