

Fireplace Safety Tips

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Fireplaces, whether they are wood-burning or gas, are both fashionable and functional additions to many homes. Families gather around decorated hearths for holiday celebrations as they build lifelong memories. During the cooler winter months, fireplaces, wood stoves and other fuel-fired appliances are often used as primary heat sources in homes.

But sadly, fireplace safety can be neglected, sometimes with tragic results. Everyone has seen the news stories about homes burned to the ground and lives lost due to improperly disposed-of fireplace ashes. According to the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), heating fires account for 36 percent of residential home fires in rural areas every year.

Here are some tips to make sure your fireplace remains a safe, enjoyable feature of your family's home:

- Have your chimney thoroughly cleaned once a year. Flammable residue that accumulates in the flue can lead to fires in the chimney, and cracks or gaps in the flue can decrease the draft required both for combustion and to carry toxic gases away from your home. You can find a certified chimney specialist at csia.org.
- Use either a metal mesh screen or glass doors—or both—as a barrier between the fireplace and hearth. If you have glass doors, leave them open while burning a fire so that the fire receives enough air to ensure complete combustion and keeps creosote from building up in the chimney. Always keep the mesh screen closed when a fire is burning to keep embers or sparks from getting into the room.
- Never use flammable liquids to start a fire, or burn cardboard boxes, trash or debris in your fireplace. Use only seasoned hardwood, non-seasoned (or green) wood tends to

smoke more and burn less efficiently, and can leave significantly more resin and soot in your chimney. Never burn any part of fir or pine trees in a fireplace. The sap can explode, and the needles can ignite quickly which could send sparks into the room or into the chimney where creosote deposits could catch fire.

- Never leave a fire unattended, and make sure the fire is completely out before going to bed or leaving the house. Douse and saturate ashes with water, and never empty ash directly into a trash can. Place completely cooled ashes in a tightly covered metal container and keep the container at least 10 feet away from any building.
- Cover the top of your chimney with a mesh screen spark arrester, and keep the roof clear of leaves, pine needles and other debris. Also cut away any branches that are hanging above the chimney.

You can find more fire safety tips on USFA's website at usfa.fema.gov.

Taking these steps will help to ensure that the time you spend around your fireplace is enjoyable, and your family and home is safe. For more home maintenance tips, contact Skip Howes at www.ScottHomesLtd.com