

TIPS FOR BUYING FIREWOOD

The seemingly endless rise of heating oil prices has many consumers considering alternative fuels to heat their homes. Good old fashioned firewood, grown and harvested locally for wood stoves and furnaces, can be a logical alternative for many. If you're considering purchasing firewood for the upcoming heating season, here are a few things to remember as you shop for a good source.

BUY LOCALLY: A listing of Connecticut Certified Forest Products Harvesters is always available at www.ct.gov/dep/forestry, so you can find a vendor in your area who harvests local wood. Moving firewood from long distances can spread insects and diseases that kill trees. Buying locally helps your local economy and promotes good forestry.

LOOK FOR THE RIGHT WOOD: Hardwoods (from deciduous, leaf-bearing trees) are generally denser and can have up to twice as much heat value per cord as softwoods (from coniferous, needle-bearing trees). Softwoods are also harder to burn without forming dangerous amounts of creosote in stovepipes and chimneys. Connecticut is blessed to lie in a region whose forests are over 80% hardwood, so this is rarely a problem. But it makes sense to ask.

GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR: Connecticut state statute 43-27 requires that firewood be sold either by weight (not advisable for stove wood) or by the "standard cord" or fraction thereof. A standard cord is "one hundred twenty eight cubic feet of compactly piled wood", which works out to a stacked pile 4 feet high, 4 feet deep and 8 feet long. Selling wood by any other measure, such as a truckload or face cord, is prohibited by law. Be sure to specify the piece length you need, so you don't get wood too long to fit into your firebox.

BURN SEASONED WOOD: Burning freshly cut "green" wood will make you unhappy and can be dangerous. Up to half the weight of green wood is water, which must be heated to steam and driven off before the wood can reach temperatures required for combustion. The result is a fire that is hard to start, hard to keep going and provides far less usable heat for the home.

Burning green wood is also more likely to result in a creosote problem. Creosote forms when temperatures drop too low in the stovepipe or chimney, and unburned but volatile gases in the smoke condense on those surfaces. Dense smoke from a smoldering fire, caused by too little air in the firebox and/or burning green wood, results in the greatest creosote buildup. Once enough creosote has accumulated, a hot fire can cause it to ignite, creating a dangerous chimney fire.

Seasoned wood is defined by law as having been "cut and air dried for at least six months." Whether or not a load of wood is seasoned may not be obvious to the untrained eye. Here are a few clues:

- Because wood shrinks when it dries, seasoned wood will have cracks or "checks" on the ends, and bark will be loose on at least some of the pieces.
- Seasoned wood is lighter than green, and banging two pieces together can produce a type of popping sound rather than a dull thud.
- The ends of at least some of the seasoned pieces will have a grey, weathered look.

Because wood dries out primarily from the ends of the pieces, cutting trees down and leaving them "tree length" requires far longer drying times than wood cut to length. In fact, if left tree length some tight barked trees such as birch will often rot before they season.

DON'T DELAY: Consumers who wait until the first frost to purchase their wood may have trouble finding wood, will often pay more and are more likely to end up with green wood.

Buying your wood early and stacking it yourself is the best way to ensure a seasoned wood supply. When stacking, keep the wood covered and leave at least 6 inches of air space between each pile for maximum drying.

BURN SAFELY: To keep your home both warm and safe, proper installation and operation of your wood stove, furnace or fireplace is essential.

Service Foresters with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Forestry and the University of Connecticut's Extension Service are available to help answer questions so you can make informed decisions on purchasing firewood and burning it safely.

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