

Making Wise Firewood Choices

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Gathering or buying good firewood requires some savvy. You don't want to burn wood that has aged for less than 6 months since being cut. A year of aging is even better. Relatively speaking, fresh or green wood is 'juicy.' It's more likely to pop out burning sparks. When you add green wood to a fire, the heat has to dry it out before the wood will burn, and that leads to a smoky fire and creosote buildup. Also, green wood doesn't produce as much heat.

The dividing point between wood as "green" or "seasoned" is a gray area. Typically, it's somewhere between six and nine months of aging.

Surface cracks on the ends of the logs isn't a good indicator. These cracks can show up just a few weeks after the logs have been cut. If you whack pieces of firewood together, though, the dry logs will have a ringing sound. Moisture-laden green wood makes a dull thud.

Finding out about wood species is an important step for buyers planning to help heat their home with wood, rather than just build an occasional fire for a cozy Saturday evening.

Many evergreens – including low-cost and widely available pine – contain a sticky sap called pitch. This sap is why the evergreens' wood is likely to spark, crackle and pop dangerously. Pitch also vaporizes in fire's heat and rises with the smoke. As it cools, however, the vapor condenses on chimney walls – or on older pitch deposits – and becomes an increasing fire hazard.

Pine can be great, easy-to-start kindling, but you're asking for trouble if you feed your wood stove a steady pine diet.

Mixed hardwoods can mean almost anything except pine and cedar. What you want for a heat source are seasoned hardwoods. You should store them, stacked outdoors, at least 4 inches off the ground to discourage rodents and insects. Stack the logs bark side up and preferably cover them with a tarp. The drier the wood stays, the longer seasoned logs will remain viable firewood. Getting the most heating value per firewood dollar isn't as simple as buying the cheapest cord available. A big point of confusion is that a cord is a measure of volume – 128 cubic feet. On the other hand, heating value ties directly to wood density – its weight. This is why an expensive cord of wood can sometimes be a bargain. While the total volume of every cord basically fills up an identical amount of space, cords can have widely differing weights. And, the heavier (denser) they are, the more heating value they have per cubic foot.

To complicate things further, some dealers only sell cords of "mixed hardwoods." If you hear 'mixed,' you really need to start asking questions. If a mixed cord contains mostly locust, hackberry and ash, it's got plenty of heat value. If it's mostly silver maple, elm and cottonwood, it had better be fairly cheap, because you'll need lots. If it's hedge, hickory and oak, that's really good wood. Both hedge and hickory are actually denser than oak, along with Black and Honey Locust, Pecan, and Mulberry. Other woods with good heat value include: Black Walnut, Kentucky Coffee Tree and Hackberry