

The Best Wood for Burning

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As the weather turns cold and energy costs increase, many homeowners are using firewood as a heating source for their homes.

According to Taun Beddes, Utah State University Extension horticulturist, when looking for the best wood to burn, hardwoods or deciduous trees produce more heat than softwoods or conifers. Other factors to consider when looking for firewood include how much smoke the wood produces, tendency to

produce sparks, ease of splitting and how long the wood has been dried.

“As a general rule, wood should be dried for a full year before it is burned,” Beddes said. “If you are going to purchase wood, find a reliable vendor to be sure you are getting a quality product. Burning wet wood produces less heat since water must evaporate before the wood can burn, and dirty smoke is produced that causes creosote buildup. This can lead to chimney fires.”

Additionally, the resin content of wood impacts the amount of smoke and sparks produced, he said. In general, hardwoods contain fewer resins and produce less smoke and sparks. Of wood available locally, Gamble oak (scrub oak) and bigtooth maple produce the least amount of smoke and burn the hottest.

“If you are planning on cutting and splitting your own wood, the ease of splitting becomes very important,” he said. “Interestingly, this is less related to hardwood or softwood and more to the particular species. Some of the densest woods are relatively easy to split while other softer woods are more difficult.”

Beddes said there are several options available for obtaining firewood. Permits are available for those who want to cut their own wood, and many vendors deliver for a reasonable price.

“Be aware that when purchasing from vendors, hardwoods generally cost about 50 percent more than softwoods,” he said. “Landfills often allow cutting from trees left at their green waste facilities. This can be an inexpensive option because high-quality hardwood can be found from trees such as honey locust, maple and ash.”

In addition, many homeowners advertise free firewood from trees they have felled if someone is willing to cut them up, he said. Construction waste, which is usually softwood, is

fine to burn as long as it has not been treated or painted. Many arborists, woodworking and pallet companies offer wood for burning. In fact, arborists can be a source of more difficult-to-come-by hardwood due to the number of shade trees they remove.

Beddes said to be aware of safety when burning firewood. Chimneys should be swept and inspected at least annually. Avoid burning wet wood, and have sufficient carbon monoxide/smoke detectors. Also watch for information on outdoor pollution levels. When an inversion sets in, the more populated counties in Northern Utah may face restrictions on burning wood.

Information on the amount of heat produced per cord for many tree species is available on the USU Forestry Extension website.
