

For: November , 2008
By: Ken Rudisill
Extension Horticulture Faculty
UF/IFAS- bay County Extension County

Choosing Firewood for the Fireplace

Last night when I went to take out the trash, the smell of wood burning in a fireplace permeated the air. Whether you have a wood-burning stove, a fireplace, or a fire pit, there are a few things you need to know about selecting and preparing your firewood.

Hardwoods make better firewood than soft woods. They produce more heat, burn longer, and generate less smoke and soot.

The denser or heavier woods have the highest energy values. So, you should choose a high-density wood if it is available in your area.

Species with high-density wood include live oak, red oaks (including water and scrub oaks), white oaks, hickories, hophornbean, dogwood and eucalyptus.

Species with medium-density wood include ash, sycamore, elm, Magnolia and red maple.

Species with low-density wood include willow, cottonwood and tulip poplar.

Density is only one consideration, however, since some high-density woods are difficult or almost impossible to split. Others are difficult to dry and store. Some have unpleasant odors, and some just don't burn well.

Personal preference plays an important part in choice of firewood. Oaks, hickories and ash are usually preferred. Live oak is one of the heavier woods. It burns well, stores well and is widely distributed, but it is somewhat difficult to split. Red oaks are plentiful and easy to split. They often have a sour odor when freshly cut. Ash has often been called the best firewood. Blackjack and other scrub oaks are preferred by some almost to the exclusion of other woods.

In order for wood to be well-seasoned for burning, it should be cut, split, and stacked in a sheltered area 6 to 8 months before use. Wood can be stacked many ways, but for satisfactory results several things should be done.

Wood should not be stacked on the ground. Use some base material such as treated fence posts, old cross ties, or sections of utility poles. Treated timbers on concrete building blocks are frequently used.

The stack may be covered on top by plywood, sheet metal, plastic sheet, or other waterproof material. The cover should be secure enough to prevent blowing off and should be adjustable as the wood is used or replaced.

When buying firewood, it's important to select firewood that is "seasoned." Seasoned means the wood has been dried to a level that will allow it to burn easily, and to give up a high proportion of its heat value.

Because of the water in it, unseasoned wood is heavier than dry wood. If you don't know whether your firewood is seasoned, compare its weight to seasoned wood of the same type. Use a bathroom scale to weigh a fixed volume, such as a cardboard boxful, of each.

There are other signs of wet, fresh-cut wood.

Split a fireplace log and look at the split surfaces. Recently cut wood will have a darker, wet-looking center with lighter, drier-looking wood near the edges or ends that have been exposed since cutting.

Wet wood will be easier to split than dry wood, too. And when firewood is very fresh the bark will be tightly attached. Bark on very dry logs usually can be pulled off easily.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an equal opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, color, creed, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, Boards Of Country Commissions Cooperating.