

Be Sure to Select the Right Firewood



As sunset keeps coming earlier and the mornings are becoming cooler, autumn seems inevitable. Soon, it will be time to start heating the house. If you have a fireplace or heat your home with a woodstove, you have to either cut or purchase firewood.

Dry, seasoned firewood burns most efficiently, giving the most heat and the least smoke. In an ideal world, you'd buy your own firewood about a year before burning it. Dense, small diameter material – such as branches from oak or madrone trees, (small unsplit rounds) – may need more than a year to be fully cured.

If you can cut it and split it, you can burn it. But there's a big difference in the ease of splitting and the heating value with green versus dry firewood and between different types of wood. Unseasoned wood is not suitable for open fireplaces. Fireplaces don't draft like a wood stove, so you need dry wood if you want to experience an even-burning fire. That's one of the reasons we're seeing more pellet stoves: too many people have been dissatisfied with the quality of wood they purchased. It is often not cured well."

Here's run-down on the splitting and burning qualities of each of the major types of firewood most commonly available in the foothills.

Douglas-fir: This ubiquitous tree has medium heating value, doesn't make too much ash, and is probably the best of the conifers for firewood – better than some of the hardwoods. Older trees or tight grain Doug-fir is easy to split. But some of the younger, second growth, smaller diameter trees can be extremely difficult to split.

Ponderosa pine: Burns hot and fast, but may be difficult to split and full of pitch.

Oak: Properly seasoned oak is hard to beat. It holds a fire, doesn't spark, and much of it splits moderately well. But, it won't produce much heat and will produce lots of ash if it isn't adequately seasoned. Be careful, as oak often grows where poison oak is rampant. If your wood comes in contact with the resin from this pernicious plant, you can develop a rash.

Madrone: When seasoned, this hard, dense wood burns very hot and produces long-lasting coals. Having little bark, madrone is clean to bring indoors. Some madrone is knotty and difficult to cut and split. It is expensive to purchase, but a little goes a long way in heating.

With today's firewood going for consistently over \$150 per cord, burning purchased firewood for economic reasons has become difficult to justify. But if you have access to firewood cutting areas and enjoy the work, then go for it. It's good exercise and one gets a sense of satisfaction at being able to see a day's work piled up in front of them.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cecalaveras.ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions.