

COVER STORY

Home fires keep burning

Safety tips

Here are some chimney and wood-burning fireplace safety tips, offered by Terence Godwin of Fireplace & Spa in Canton.

- Clean your chimney once a year, even though you're a "weekend burner." Contact a chimney cleaning company that's licensed.
- Make sure you have a cap on your chimney. Except for Santa, no other critter should come down your chimney.
- Look up your chimney. You should see daylight coming from top but NOT from the sides. If daylight is visible from the sides, you may have crumbling mortar joints.
- Check for creosote deposits. Creosote is thick, more like gum than soot. If you can't see definition in the mortar joints, you may have a creosote buildup.
- Make sure your fireplace has an operable fire screen.
- Little sparks can produce big fires where you don't want them.
- Consider using "Safe-T-Flue," a creosote-preventing product you can sprinkle on your wood before burning.
- Keep a fireplace fire extinguisher nearby.

BY HENRY M. SKOGLUND
SPECIAL WRITER

Ever since fire was tamed and brought inside, the fireplace has been the favorite gathering spot of friends and family. Few images are as inviting, as heartwarming, as the rosy glow of crackling flames. It was the huge oak fireplace in the library that lured Dennis and Laura Standhardt of Birmingham to buy a Victorian style home closer to the city's downtown area recently.

"It's a very traditional English fireplace. It comes from London and was built in approximately 1840. It's all red oak and measures approximately eight by six feet. The entire library, the molding and the paneling, was designed proportionately around the fireplace," said Dennis Standhardt, an interior designer and president of Standhardt Design in Bloomfield Hills.

The fireplace, which was reconstructed around an existing masonry opening, isn't exactly heat efficient. However, the Standhardts have no plans to alter its 36-by-30-inch opening.

"Instead of the efficiency of a contemporary heat-saving unit, we want to preserve the English tradition," Dennis said.

Today, the heat-efficiency rating of factory-built gas and wood-burning fireplaces, as well as gas and wood-burning inserts for existing masonry fireplaces, can exceed 70 and 80 percent. And for wood-burning units, burn time is longer, meaning less wood is consumed.

Innovations

One of the latest important innovations in the fireplace industry has been direct-venting. Santa may very well have to start using the front door because gas fireplaces can be installed without a chimney. Combustion wastes are routed directly from the fireplace to the outside wall.

"Gas direct-vent came out about eight years ago. It represents a new niche. It eliminates the chimney from going all the way up to the roof," said Rob Matiyov, general manager of Atlas Veneers and Fireplaces in Troy, one of the area's largest independent fireplace companies. Gas fireplaces account for about 80 percent of Atlas' sales.

Dramatic fireplace designs are possible with direct-venting, like a three-sided gas unit incorporated within a decorative peninsula. The fireplace can be installed several feet from a wall as long as the venting pipe has direct outside access. In addition, both gas and wood-burning fireplaces can be direct-vented through the roof, allowing for installation against inside walls or as free-standing units.

If you already have an existing masonry structure and want more heating efficiency than a gas log, Matiyov suggests installing a gas fireplace insert. These inserts are "self-contained viewing furnaces" that include gas logs, blowers and glass doors.

"The insert makes it possible to heat 1,200 square feet at a cost of 8 to 15 cents an hour. In contrast, a gas log with a 100 percent opened flue costs 35 cents to operate per hour. In addition, your furnace works two to three times more to offset heat loss," he said.

Of course, if all you want is a gas log, keep in mind not all logs are created equal. There's clay ceramic and sand and shell ceramic. Terence Godwin, assistant manager of Fireplace & Spa in Canton, demonstrated the difference in his company's showroom. When he turned both types on and off, the clay log retained the "rosy glow" much longer.

"The clay will hold the heat and give it back to you. When you turn it off, you'll lose some heat up the chimney but the log still radiates it back to you," he said.

Wood burning

But what if you're a purist, like the Standhardts, absolutely in love with the look, the smell, the sound of crackling wood?

Don't apologize. Wood has warmed hearths for thousands of years and is nature's renewable heat source. Just remember, however, the average open fireplace sends 89 to 100 percent of the fire's heat up the chimney. It also draws warm air from the room it's intended to heat.

You might consider a wood-burning insert, which according to *Hearth & Home* magazine could increase your heating efficiency by 75 percent. However, Godwin suggests a simpler and less expensive solution: glass doors and grate heater.

"When you burn wood you can close the doors. The grate has its own blower, drawing in the cool air in the home and blowing out the hot air," he said.

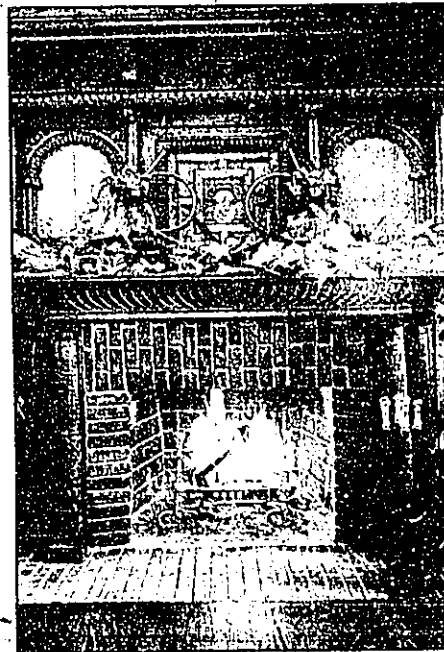
Fireplace lovers know, however, that having a fireplace is about more than just heating efficiency. It's about esthetics.

Like her husband, Laura Standhardt loves the grandness of the big oak fireplace in her new home's library, but the smaller wood and marble fireplace in the upstairs master bedroom enchants her. Like its larger counterpart, whose chimney it shares, it's an antique and was reconstructed around an existing masonry opening.

"It has a mantel and beveled mirror, all one piece. It's really beautiful. It's extremely dry now. It needs to be nourished with lemon oil. We've always had newer, contemporary homes and having something old like this is very special," she said.

For a few thousand dollars and a visit to a fireplace showroom, you can create your own special fireplace. You can custom frame a gas or wood-burning unit in a variety of rich woods and marbles or choose models that allow you to view your fire from multiple sides.

Godwin tells all his customers, "I can make them anything their heart desires."



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL HANSEN

Home fire: The main fireplace in the Birmingham home of Dennis and Laura Standhardt was built about 150 years ago and is made of red oak.

On the Cover:
This three-sided, direct-vent gas fireplace vents out the back, allowing usable space above it. It becomes a decorative room divider.
Photo courtesy of Atlas Veneers and Fireplaces.