

Forestry 101

Forestry for Woodland Owners

Firewood and Fine Wines

By Doug McLaren



Firewood. Photo courtesy: Doug McLaren

Firewood and fine wines have something in common: both often improve with age. This is why firewood left from last year tends to burn more efficiently than wood bought during the current burning season. It's all a matter of seasoning.

But with daytime temperatures reaching 90 degrees and humidity levels trying to rival the thermostat, it is hard to think about gathering firewood for the approaching home-heating season. The months of August and September are the last months to consider cutting firewood for the upcoming winter. Trees are naturally low in moisture content this time of year, aiding the drying process and it provides three to four months of drying time before the winter heating season sets in. Next year consider getting an earlier jump on the process to provide the full curing time for properly cured or "seasoned" firewood. Cutting, splitting and proper stacking should optimally be done six months prior to your fireplace needs.

Trees are much like the human body. Both are made up of a large portion of water, and if you cut a tree and attempt to immediately burn it in a fireplace, the largest portion of the heat generated will be used to continue the drying process of the wood. If firewood is properly dried, the majority of the heat generated will be used to heat your home.

If you normally purchase firewood for your home-heating needs rather than cutting your own, there are several items to look for when purchasing your properly seasoned firewood for this burning season. First, note whether the wood has been split, providing for more surface area from which to lose moisture. In addition, if the wood has a gray color, you can be reassured that the wood has been drying for a long time. Checking for large cracks and splits on the end surface signifies low moisture content in the wood.

Remember that wood can reabsorb water, so it is important to properly care for it after it has been seasoned. Stacking it in an area so that air can continue to circulate around the stack will continue the drying process. Place a cover only on the top of the wood stack to keep water from running through the stack. Leave the ends free to the sun and air so drying will continue.

Firewood that has not been properly seasoned will cause a fire to smolder and generate creosote buildup in the fireplace and chimney. Creosote buildup in the chimney, over time, can possibly lead to a chimney fire. Inefficient burning of firewood can also lead to poor draft up the chimney, which in turn can cause smoke-filled rooms.

Wood fires are an enjoyable, as well as a sometimes necessary, part of our lives during the cool days of fall and the coldest days of winter. Don't get burnt by having all the heat from your firewood go to drying the wood and not to warming you and your home. For more information about firewood, visit <http://www.ca.uky.edu/forestryextension/Firewood.php>



*Only cover the top of the firewood stack.
Adapted from www.woodlanddirect.com.*

Author:

Doug McLaren

Doug is an Area Cooperative Extension Specialist with the University of Kentucky Department of Forestry.

Cooperative Extension Service, Department of Forestry, University of Kentucky, 107 Thomas Poe Cooper Building, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40546-0073; E-mail dmclaren@uky.edu; Phone 859.257.2703; Fax 859.323.1031.

Comparison of Properties Affecting Firewood

This list shows tree species according to their value as firewood. Those at the top rank higher than those lower on the list. Those ranked as poor for splitting should be avoided.

Species	Heat Content Per Cord (Million BTU) 20% Moisture Content	Splitting
Osage-orange	30.5	Fair
Hickory	29.3	Good
Black locust	28.3	Good
White oak	27.9	Good
Bur oak	26.3	Good
Beech	26.3	Good
Sugar maple	25.9	Good
Pin oak	25.9	Fair
Red oak	25.9	Fair
White ash	24.6	Excellent
Honeylocust	24.6	Fair
Blue ash	23.8	Excellent
Black walnut	22.6	Excellent
Hackberry	21.7	Good
Slippery elm	21.7	Poor
Sweetgum	21.3	Fair
Virginia pine	20.7	Good
Black cherry	20.5	Good
American elm	20.5	Poor
Sycamore	20.2	Poor
Redcedar	20.2	Fair
Silver maple	19.3	Good
Sassafras	18.9	Good
Yellow-poplar	17.3	Good
Hemlock	17.3	Excellent
Willow	16.0	Fair
Basswood	15.2	Excellent
White pine	15.0	Good