



Avoiding Trouble with Wood Stoves

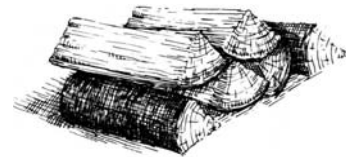
By Jim Ochterski, Cornell Cooperative Extension

The warm, radiant heat from a wood stove is very enjoyable on cold winter days. On the other hand, an unexpected chimney fire is frightening and unpleasant, and could trigger a major house fire. By following a few simple habits, you can enjoy your wood heating appliance without the worry of a house fire tragedy.

Most people do not realize that creosote builds up in all chimneys attached to operating wood stoves and fireplaces; it is practically inevitable. Creosote is very flammable and easily ignites inside your chimney under the right conditions.

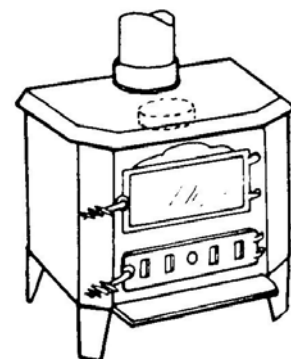
Whether it is attached to a wood stove or fireplace, your chimney should be cleaned and inspected every year. Chimney cleaning is a worthwhile expense and is an important part of heating your home with wood. A trained, professional chimney sweep will clean your stove with the proper equipment and inspect the chimney for cracks, water leaks, misalignment, and deterioration. Have this work done before each burning season.

Burn dry, seasoned hardwood always. A few pieces of unseasoned or softwood firewood greatly contribute to creosote build-up in a chimney. Much of the firewood that is trucked and delivered around the Finger Lakes is not fully seasoned. It takes about two years for firewood to be fully seasoned. The only way you can be sure it is seasoned is to buy it a year or more before you burn it. Stack the firewood in rows under a shelter or tarp and let it dry completely. Loose piles do not promote proper seasoning.



Hardwoods suited for wood stoves include maple, oak, hickory, locust, ash, beech, and walnut. Avoid using pine, willow, cottonwood, aspen, birch, box elder, elm, and silver maple. If you are not sure what kind of wood you have for burning, use a tree identification guide or bring it to Cornell Cooperative Extension for inspection.

When you burn wood, monitor the temperature in the stack with a stovepipe thermometer. For less than \$20, you will be able to tell at a glance whether your wood stove temperature is too cool, too hot, or just right. There are no thermometers for fireplaces, so it is important to keep the fire burning brightly, but not roaring.



Chimney cleaning products like special logs and powders are not a substitute for mechanical brushing. These products may provide a small amount of creosote reduction, but are not reliable for complete chimney cleaning. Keep in mind that any creosote loosened with chemicals must be removed from the chimney,

pipe, or stove. Otherwise, it will remain inside as a potential fire hazard.

If you think your chimney is on fire, get out of the house. Call the fire department and explain the situation. If it is possible, close all dampers or glass doors on the stove or fireplace. Monitor for flare-ups for two to three hours after the incident. Call a professional chimney technician to inspect for damage and remedies.

Here are some other tips that will reduce problems with your firewood and wood stove:

- Store all firewood outdoors, away from the house. This keeps ants, termites, other insects and mice away from the house. Bring in enough firewood for a day or two.
- Keep firewood dry and off the ground. Avoid storing firewood in the forest where wood-eating insects can infest the logs.
- Remove loose bark flaps and inspect for holes that have been bored. Do not bring in firewood with insect infestations.
- Do not use insecticides to kill firewood insects. Leave the wood outside, away from the house. Split it into thin segments to remove the insects, then use the splits for kindling.
- Monitor woodpile gaps and hollow logs for mouse shelters. Hollow logs brought inside can house mice and other unwanted pests.
- Insects accidentally brought indoors in winter should be vacuumed or swept and disposed.

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