

Fireplace Mastery



they're close enough to the fireplace. The savvy homeowner regularly removes soot deposits and ash accumulations and keeps the fireplace opening screened.

Threats can arise in trying to start the fire, and in keeping it going without filling the house with smoke. You also want to avoid sending your home's expensive, conventionally produced heat up the fireplace chimney.

Assuming the fireplace was designed properly, fireplace mastery lies in controlling the flow of air to and from the flame. When you open the damper to start a fire on a cold day, the heavier cold air outside will tend to slide into the chimney, keeping the inside, warmer air from rushing upward and creating a draft. To start the updraft, hold a lighted newspaper inside the fireplace, near the top, before igniting the materials on the hearth. If you have difficulty establishing an "updraft," you may have to address trees or buildings near the chimney and their "tripping" factor.

Smoke in the home results when the updraft is inadequate to pull all products of combustion up the chimney. As air is

heated it rises. If the exit system is adequate, and if cooler replacement air arrives steadily at the fires base you should develop a sufficient updraft. If you don't generate sufficient updraft, you can compensate, to some extent, by reducing the back hearth, installing a canopy hood, or raising the chimney height.

Even double-wall units designed to create warm air for the home must be provided with air to replace, which goes up the chimney. This means if you don't have a duct from the outside to the hearthside, you must open, at least slightly, the window nearest to the blaze. Otherwise, you'll have a fire that will either smolder unsatisfactorily, or your cozy fireplace will suck the heat from the rest of your home up the chimney.

A number of conditions can contribute to smoking problems in a fireplace. In some cases, some relatively simple measures may improve conditions. In others, further evaluation and more extensive repairs may be necessary. A certified chimney sweep is usually the appropriate professional to consult for fireplace or chimney problems.

Here are some possible practical solutions to aggravating smoke problems:

* Raise Hearth. A fireplace opening can be decreased by raising the back of the hearth. To experiment, a sheet metal hearth can be supported on bricks placed on the existing hearth. If this experiment improves the fire, the back hearth may be raised by firebrick masonry, and the front hearth may also be built up.

* Extend chimney. The higher the chimney, the better the draft. A good draft is usually provided by a chimney which is 20 feet high or more from hearth to the top of the chimney. If the existing chimney is short (less than 15 feet) a good draft (or upward movement of the flue gases) may just not be able to develop. One or more metal chimney sections can be temporarily installed on top of an existing chimney to test whether the draft is improved before a more permanent and expensive fix is tried.

* Trim trees. Wavering smoke patterns above the chimney may indicate that tall trees are causing downdraft. The trees should be trimmed and/or flue height extended to determine if the trees are the cause.



* Chimney cap or Flueguard. If downdrafts appear to affect the exhaust gases, a chimney cap or flueguard, of metal or stone, may be tried to deflect the air from entering the chimney.

* Draft inducer. When no other remedies work, consideration may be given to a fan that forces air up the chimney. Such draft inducing equipment must be professionally installed, specifically designed for the purpose, and must be listed by an approved testing agency. Periodic inspection and maintenance will be required.

Any of these suggestions, as a possible means of correcting smoking fireplace conditions, may be only the first step in some situations. If there are major fireplace deficiencies or the chimney has deteriorated, more drastic measures will be needed. The only practical options in some cases may be to rebuild the fireplace and/or chimney. Replacing the existing fireplace with a gas-fired unit coupled to a new metal flue inside the defective chimney, is also an option as is the installation of an electric fireplace (sealing off the old chimney entirely).

When in doubt always consult a specialist, and remember Safety First, enjoyment thereafter.

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By Richard Grunder

The urge to sit around a cozy fire over the holiday season stems more from comfort than necessity. Unless the energy situation gets worse, today's homeowner really doesn't need to bring an open fire into the home for warmth or cooking. Make sure that comfort doesn't come at a needlessly high price. If you have a fireplace in your home, be sure to address the accompanying dangers its use entails.

Carbonaceous deposits in the flue or clean-out pit can flare suddenly into high-intensity flames, possibly overheating structural materials. Burning embers can "pop" or rollout onto rugs, newspapers, cushions or other combustibles, if

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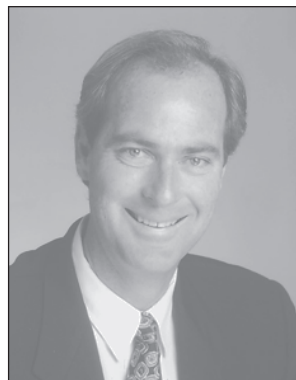
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