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GET THE MOST FROM YOUR WOOD-BURNING DOLLARS

Source: Doug McLaren, extension forester

Wood may rarely be used as a primary heat source today, but many homeowners continue to use fireplaces and wood-burning stoves to help reduce their use of other energy sources.

Wood can provide an economical and enjoyable way to heat your home, and it pays to know a thing or two about purchasing and using this natural resource.

The first question often asked is what kind of wood to buy. Knowing if a species is a high or low density wood can have a big impact on the amount needed. Low density woods such as yellow poplar, silver and red maples, and buckeye, contain a greater amount of air between the cell walls. High density species such as oak, black locust, hickory, ash and beech produce more heat per unit volume because they contain more wood and less air in their cellular structures. Moisture contents being equal, the more economical purchase will be high-density woods that generate more heat.

Another important factor to evaluate is how well the wood was seasoned. Wood comes from living plants which means they contain water. The moisture in unseasoned wood can account for up to 50 percent of its weight. Energy generated from burning wet wood goes toward evaporating the moisture within the wood itself and can greatly diminish its heat producing capacity. Seasoned wood has been allowed to air dry for six to 12 months which removes the largest percentage of water. Well-seasoned firewood is gray in color. It has splits in the ends of the logs and looks weathered. Round logs split into smaller sections yield more surface area and speed the drying process.

Knowledge of how firewood is measured is a third important piece of information to learn in order to get the most from your wood-burning dollars. Terms used for describing a volume of wood include cord, face cord, fireplace cord and rick. The size and shape of individual logs and how carefully they are stacked influences the actual volume regardless of the weight purchased. These terms are open for interpretation, and the best buy is a mutual agreement between the consumer and the seller. The purchase price also may include splitting, delivery and stacking.

Finally, if you plan to transport your purchased firewood, you need to estimate the weight of the load. Common high density species used for fuel wood, such as oak and hickory are extremely heavy per unit volume. Weights equaling 4,500 pounds can be quickly reached without using the full capacity of the truck or trailer used to transport the load.

The best firewood produces the greatest heat value at the lowest cost. For more information about firewood and fireplace and heating stove safety, contact the Scott County Cooperative Extension Service.

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