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Heart & Hearth

Being Prepared For The Home Heating Season

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By: Patrick Breen

If you're someone who routinely supplements their home heating by burning wood - you've most likely started your preparations months ago. If you just purchased a wood burner, or have recently bought a new home with one installed, you'd better get started. Preparing for the season is usually thought of as gathering, splitting and stacking your firewood; but you should also incorporate a routine evaluation of your system. It's easy to become accustomed to our surroundings, and can be difficult to see our structure and systems with a fresh eye. So, whether you are an old pro or a novice looking forward to your first season it is always a good idea to step back and do an inspection.

A good rule of thumb - begin the season with a clean chimney flue free of creosote. This is an extremely combustible product caused by the cooling of smoke and gases as they travel up the chimney. These gases liquefy, combine, and solidify forming creosote that builds up on your flue lining. Cleaning is achieved by scraping the walls from the roof level with a chimney brush. If you do not contract this service, measure your flue dimensions and purchase a brush sized accordingly.

When cleaning your flue be sure to shine a strong flashlight down the stack to check for obstructions. Common objects found are children's toys, animals and tree debris. These objects can also hinder the proper movement of your damper, so be sure to check its full operation.

Inspect for gaps forming between the exterior wall and the chimney. If the gap is wider towards the top than at the bottom this would indicate movement of your chimney foundation and necessitate evaluation by a licensed contractor for repair. To draw properly chimneys must extend a minimum of three feet above the roof surface and two feet higher than any part of the building within 10 feet.

Whether you have a freestanding wood burner, a fireplace or an insert it is important to have a proper sized hearth and clearance. A hearth supports the fireplace or burner and keeps fire, ashes and embers a safe distance from combustibles. Fireplace openings less than six square feet should have a hearth that extends out at least 16 inches and covers eight inches on both sides. Larger openings should extend a minimum 20 inches and be at least 12 inches on both sides. Freestanding units have different ratings for back and side clearance. Check the data plate or call the manufacturer for proper clearances.

Single walled stove pipe should connect directly into a masonry chimney and should not pass through a wall or ceiling, and not be wrapped in insulation. Distance should be at least 18 inches from any combustible wall, ceiling or furniture. Double and triple walled class 'A' chimneys should be the only metal chimney passing through a wall or ceiling. Finally, be sure to check and/or change the batteries in your smoke alarms. An alarm should be present in every living space and bedroom.