

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Flame and Fortune

If you've been walking the dog in the evening during this damp, chilly season, you've undoubtedly smelled the rich aroma of burning oak, almond or cyprus from the neighborhood chimneys. To me, the best thing about winter is the fireplace.

Most of us grew up with cozy wood-burning fireplaces, and we love them for the flames, the romance and that wonderful snap-crackle-pop sound – not to mention that aroma. You probably know that many Bay Area municipalities have now restricted or outlawed wood-burning fireplaces in new homes because of air-quality issues.

If you have an old-fashioned wood-burner, take care of it. Fireboxes, flues (the metal liner that runs up inside the chimney) and chimney caps wear out and require regular maintenance. Inspect everything once a year – especially the cap, which gets blasted by the weather and tends to corrode. Make a visual inspection of the damper and other moving parts.

If you use the fireplace frequently or burn artificial logs or smoky wood like cyprus, clean the chimney annually to remove creosote, the black sticky stuff that condenses from chimney smoke. Creosote is extremely flammable and can cause flue and chimney fires.

You can hire a professional to clean and inspect your chimney – it's not expensive – or, if you don't mind heights and soot, you can do the cleaning yourself with a chimney brush and a couple of extension poles. Just cover everything around the fireplace with tarps, and don't forget to close the damper until you're finished, at which point you'll want to vacuum up the debris.

If your fireplace and flue are old, corroded or just inefficient, you might want to install a high-efficiency wood-burning heating unit (which are code-compliant in San Mateo County, by the way) for more warmth and better air quality. You can order a new system from a fireplace supply store. A standard zero-clearance fireplace, which consists of a box that fits snugly into the wood-framed wall opening and a fitted flue, generally costs anywhere from \$650 to \$1250, while a high-efficiency unit putting out radiant and convective heat will cost \$3500 and up. Fireplace inserts are a great alternative and are simple to install or retrofit.

Fireplace replacement is a potential do-it-yourself job – measure carefully to determine the dimensions of the firebox and the length of the flue you need, and then follow the directions. Three cautionary notes, however – first, this is hard (and dirty!) work; second, installation by anyone other than a certified installer generally voids the warranty on the firebox; and third, follow the manufacturer's installation criteria precisely. Changing the chimney cap is a much easier do-it-yourselfer – make sure the new cap is stainless steel, which lasts longer.

A less vertical project is installing new fireplace doors. Old-fashioned fireplaces have a tendency to suck the warm air out of your living room and right up the flue, whether there's a fire going or not. You can install ceramic glass doors on the front of the fireplace to prevent that. If you miss that popping sound, opt for sliding screens or separate hearth screens to keep embers from popping onto the floor. And, of course, a fireproof hearth rug is an absolute necessity.

If your home is newer, your fireplace is probably gas – which has its advantages. We'll talk about gas fireplaces next time.

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