

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Gas on the Fire

In our last column, we talked about the care, maintenance and replacement of wood-burning fireplaces – and our romantic attachment to them. But many Bay Area municipalities now frown on wood-burners because of air-quality issues, and most new homes are now built with gas fireplaces that don't pollute.

That's not a bad thing. Gas may not have the same romantic cachet as wood – you miss out on the crackle, the aroma and the fun of building the fire – but it does have advantages. One big one is that they are highly efficient and clean-burning. Another is that most of the maintenance issues we talked about with wood-burning fireplaces, like cleaning creosote out of your chimney, don't exist with gas. Yet another is the instant on/off capability – if you have a gas fireplace in your master bedroom, you can click it on immediately when you're cold and turn it off when you're ready to go to sleep, with no worries about burning embers. And you don't have to schlep armloads of logs up the stairs or carry the ashes down.

About half the fireplaces we install these days are gas-powered, although that percentage goes up and down with the varying cost of natural gas, and people are even replacing traditional wood-burning fireplaces with gas. Today's gas-fired units are so efficient that they can heat a considerable portion of the house by themselves. You can install a clean-burning gas-fired insert in an existing fireplace or place a freestanding gas unit anywhere in the room – the installer just runs the gas supply pipe up under the floor and provides the necessary venting.

My reference to using a professional installer is deliberate. Installing a gas fireplace yourself is certainly possible, but it's not for the novice – gas units are pretty sophisticated, so you need to have a good technical understanding or background. If you need to ask how to do it, you probably shouldn't try. And it's worth noting that the warranty on a fireplace unit is usually voided if it's not installed by a licensed pro.

The good news is that safety is assured with a properly installed unit. Most gas fireplaces today are direct-vent sealed systems that eliminate the risk of natural gas – or carbon monoxide – leaking into the living area. Direct-vent systems send the exhaust gases out through the wall (and pull combustion air in) through a pipe as small as five inches in diameter, which lowers cost, simplifies installation and offers flexibility on the location of the unit. Older gas fireplaces used vent pipes the size of water mains that had to be run up through the roof. A few of those old models are still around, but avoid them. Direct-vent is the way to go.

You can also do some very cool things (no pun intended) with gas fireplaces that just aren't possible with wood. You can connect a remote control unit to your bedroom thermostat that automatically lights the fire when the room temperature drops to a certain level. You can even use a handheld remote to light the fire, like one of those *sauve* '60s movie bachelors. And with a flat screen plasma TV installed over the fireplace, you're livin' large.

Oh, and one more advantage to gas – a romantic evening in front of the fireplace always seems to go better if you don't have to keep getting up to stoke the fire. Trust me on this one.

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