

Flue season: Time to warm up to fireplace safety

BY CHERYL WALKER
Copley News Service

Sitting at home in front of a warm, comfy fire sounds nice. But it doesn't take much for that scenario to turn dangerous. Too often, fireplace safety is brushed aside with the thought that there are bigger fire hazards. But not so.

"One of the most important things is to keep the fireplace clean," said Margie Coloian, a spokeswoman for the National Fire Protection Association. "We strongly recommend it be cleaned regularly or have it cleaned by a chimney sweep."

When thinking "clean," have the fireplace inspected at least once a year. Creosote buildup can be a big problem.

"Creosote is black in color and it's like a gas," Coloian said. "It is especially important that this doesn't build up in the chimney as it can cause a major fire." The flue should be

checked often for obstructions. Birds are attracted by the warmth and like to build nests there. Keep trees around the house trimmed so the branches don't hang over and break off inside the chimney and cause a major obstruction.

Also, make sure the flue is kept open while a fire is burning. If it's closed, carbon monoxide can build up.

Along with keeping the fireplace in good working condition, make sure the fire is the right size for the fireplace. Never put too many logs on the fire at one time.

"Sometimes, people get impatient and really want to get the fire going — so they load it up with a lot of wood," Coloian said. "It doesn't take long for a fire to get out of control. Homeowners should always make sure to place the logs at the rear and a grate should be used."

Choose the right wood when building a fire.

Usually homeowners use hard woods such as hickory, ash and oak because they burn cleaner than soft woods such as cedar, pine and fir.

Wood should be well seasoned and have a moisture content of less than 20 percent. Don't use any other burning materials other than wood. This is a concern especially during the holidays.

"I know around Christmastime people want to put their wrapping in the fire," Coloian said. "This is not good and is very dangerous. Also other trash should never, never be burned. The only thing that belongs there is wood."

When using artificial logs, make sure to read the instructions before lighting.

Use long-stemmed matches for starting the fire.

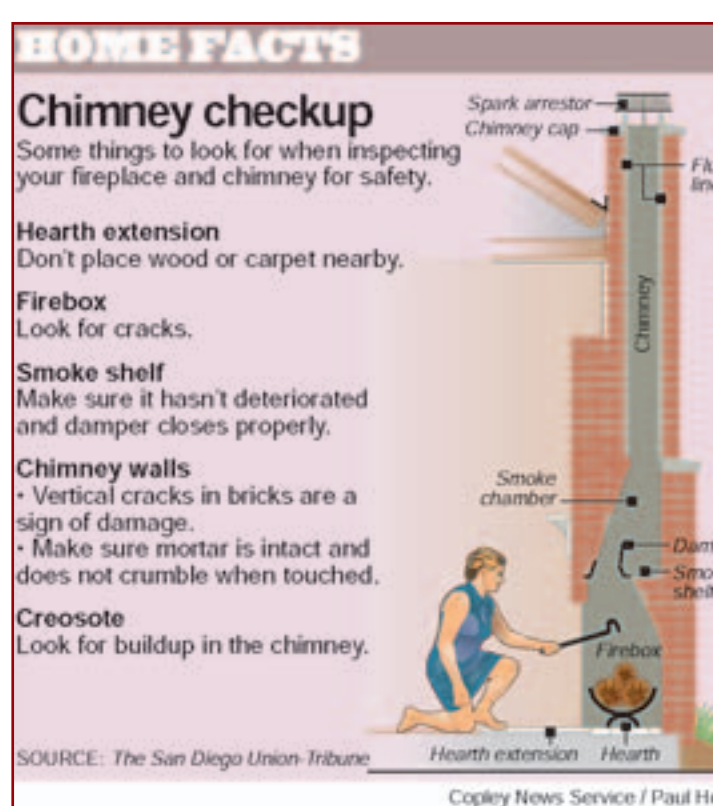
Fluids such as kerosene or gasoline should not be used. And most important, never, never burn char-

coal. A fireplace is not the right spot to put a hibachi for cooking hamburgers and hot dogs. Doing so can cause deadly carbon monoxide to build up, so leave that activity for outdoors.

There are several tips that homeowners should keep in mind for safety, beginning with keeping the area around the fireplace and chimney clear of debris.

"People especially need to watch what they put on a mantel," said Coloian. "Socks or any clothing should never be hung there to dry. Spare wood should be kept away from the fireplace as it can get very hot and ignite, and cause a fire outside of the fireplace."

People may be tempted to keep a fire going to cut down on their heating bill, but this isn't good either. Never leave a fire unattended. It should be extinguished before going to bed.



A fireplace should have a screen or glass doors. If there are doors, they should be left open while burning, making sure there

is enough air for the fire to burn. After the fire is extinguished, then the doors may be closed to keep the warm air inside.

Fall home exterior improvement now can save you winter woes

BY BETHANY BROADWELL
Special to the Record-Eagle

Before homeowners hunker down for the winter, they may want to consider performing some fall home exterior tasks now rather than later. A number of nooks and crannies may need attention — whether people choose to do it themselves or hire a professional.

"Minor repairs and maintenance can virtually eliminate major repairs later," said Mark Norton, owner of The Handy Helper.

As an example, he said that an afternoon's worth of weather stripping and caulking is a minimal investment that could save a homeowner several hundred dollars during the next four to six winter months, considering the upcoming cost of heating fuels.

Norton outlined several fall projects and how they should be handled:

Roofs/flashing: Get up there and inspect the roof for sags or missing shingles. Make sure vents and all items attached to the roof, such as an antenna or satellite dish, are secure.

Gutters and downspouts: Clean them and inspect them for low spots or hangers that have loosened. Repair them promptly because low spots can ultimately lead to ice damage. Standing water and ice cause unnecessary weight, which could pull the gutters off the house.

Sump pumps: Check sump pumps four times each year as many manufacturers recommend. Fall is the most important time because melting snow can cause ice which may keep the sumps

from operating properly.

Air conditioners: Remove window units and close windows. Wall units should be covered with a rigid insulation. Free standing units should be partially covered, allowing them to breathe, but their tops should be protected from falling ice and accumulating snow.

Chimneys: Check for cracked mortar. Chimney caps keep out unwanted visitors and rainwater. Have the chimney inspected and cleaned regularly.

Concrete and asphalt: Cracks should be filled so water does not seep in and freeze, causing more cracks and crumbling the concrete and asphalt.

Sprinklers/faucets: Remove and drain garden hoses for storage. Have underground sprinklers blown out and drained. Shut off all outdoor faucets and shut them off under the house if possible.

James Dye, president of Quality Built Windows in Traverse City, said he thinks of windows and doors as the eyes and nose of a home.

In terms of window upkeep, Dye advised inspecting, then caulking or putting all cracks around the sash and glass.

He said, "A 1/8-inch crack

around the perimeter of a 28- x 54-inch window will allow the same air infiltration as removing an 8-inch brick from the wall."

Those who have metal windows may want to replace them, according to Dye, because aluminum and steel are conductors of heat and cold. He added those who have storm windows will want to make sure they seal.

For door upkeep, Dye said it is necessary to paint and maintain any wood parts like the frame and door panels, because moisture that enters the wood will cause the paint to peel. He also recommends checking the weather stripping around the edge of the door for wear and eliminating any daylight from coming around the door.

Those with storm doors, Dye concluded, should make sure the bottom sweep seal is contacting the sill.

Homeowners who are neglectful in maintaining their windows and doors may have to replace them due to rot and high energy loss.

"At best old, wood windows, properly maintained, will give you an insulation value of approximately R-1.5," he said. "We offer new vinyl windows that can increase that value to an R-9, 800 percent more energy

efficient."

While making a home snug may have a certain cozy connotation, Robin Smillie, general manager of Garden Goods in Traverse City said, "Gardening in the fall isn't as appealing as in the spring when new life is being breathed into the garden."

She said that Garden Goods staff recommends gardening tasks like emptying soil from unglazed pottery pieces and washing them with a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water, removing diseased foliage from under plants, raking leaves from the lawn and protecting tender plants with mulched leaves. All of these steps are efforts so gardeners find their plants healthy and fungus free in the spring.

Roses, according to Smillie, need the special protection of a Warps rose collar and mulching with 8-10 inches of mulch.

"The fall is the very best time to seed your yard as the ground is very warm and we have lots of natural moisture in the air," Smillie said. "Applying a fall fertilizer to your lawn about mid-October helps the root systems grow strong. Protecting shrubs that may suffer breakage from snow fall is recommended, and burlap makes a great protective

wrap."

For those who still want to be planting, according to Smillie, mid-October is the time to plant narcissus (daffodils), tulips and other spring bulbs if they want an early spring.

"Early frost can come and the weather can get very cold, very quickly here in the north," Smillie cautioned. "It can sometimes be hard to get motivated to cut things down when all you really want to do is watch them grow again."

Meanwhile, Jason Gothard, store manager of Ace Hardware, said staff at the Front Street location do not offer direct service, but they offer the full range of products people need to

help winterize their homes/gardens along with advice on how to use products ranging from driveway sealer, expanding foam, grass seed and rodent trap.

"Mostly, people lack the confidence to feel that they can do these projects by themselves," Gothard said.

Handy Helper Norton reasoned if the fear factor is still too great, professionals are equipped with the tool and know-how to do it right the first time.

"We are a very cost effective 'solution provider' for home maintenance all year long, not just in the fall," Norton said.

Bethany Broadwell is a local freelance writer.

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