

# Maximizing your Hearth

## *15 ways to make the most of your new fireplace*

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Whether it is a grand masonry fireplace stretching high through a cathedral ceiling or a small gas fireplace tucked into a corner, your hearth will no doubt be a focal point your log home. But a hearth is more than just a place with a fire. To create the look, feel and warmth you want, you need to keep these guidelines in mind.

### **1. Choose your heat source.**

I often get asked what is the best fuel to use for a fireplace-gas or wood? While there are other fuels also, I also ask “How do you wish to you your fireplace.” If you just want to come in, flick a switch and have instant flame, then maybe gas is for you. If you don’t mind the work associated with cutting kindling and firewood and really want the open crackling blaze then maybe wood is your choice. Of course, there are many other questions to ask.

### **2. Weigh appearance against consumption.**

There is a significant difference in appearance and fuel consumption between an open fire and a fire burning behind glass doors. An open fire is very inviting, though it consumes considerable fuel as well as oxygen from your room. A sealed fire is less

visible or audible, but burns less fuel. With many wood-burning stoves that are designed simply for heat, you can't even see the flames.

### **3. Consider efficiency.**

Generally with open-burning fireplaces, the larger the firebox, the lower the efficiency. Gas fireplaces can be very efficient, but select a unit that lets you control the flame from flicker to full burn, so you can control fuel consumption. Continuously burning pilot lights can use up a significant amount of fuel. Consider a unit with electronic ignition unless you use your fireplace for primary heat or power outages that are common. Masonry heaters are wood-burning fireplaces that are designed to generate maximum heat through a combination of secondary combustion and radiant heat from a large surface area. Most factory-built fireplaces and stoves come with an efficiency rating. Check before you buy.

### **4. Don't block the view!**

I have seen many scenic views compromised by placing an imposing fireplace right in the middle of the vista. Instead of locating your hearth on the view wall, consider putting it at right angles to the view. During the day the view is typically your focus. At night, it is the fireplace.

### **5. Share flue enclosures and stonework.**

The expense of a fireplace is often in the enclosures and stonework. Backing two units against each other can reduce the cost of both. With many plan layouts, a great

room fireplace can back up against a fireplace in an adjacent bedroom. Sometimes two rooms can even share one fireplace. Several zero-clearance fireplaces are open on two sides, creating a divider between two spaces. There are also three-sided and four-sided fireplaces for even more viewing choices.

## **6. Make the most of your heat.**

Although open fires are beautiful, most of the heat goes up the chimney - literally up in smoke. Well-designed fireplaces and stoves have air spaces around the combustion chamber to pick up heat and transport it to the room through convection. Some units have ducts that direct the heat into other rooms. Re-circulating fans will increase the transfer of heat. Ceramic glass doors allow considerably more passage of radiant heat than tempered glass doors. A large ceiling fan can drive rising warm air into other rooms. Alternatively, an intake fan near the ceiling can return the warm air to floor level. In the first home I built, I installed a 'water jacket', a heat exchanger that transferred the heat of the fireplace into water that was piped through the fireplace. Circulating the warm water into a storage tank provided most of my home's hot water needs. If heating your home is your focus, then locate your hearth on an interior wall, preferably near the center of your home.

## **7. Put on your best face.**

While the fire is likely the reason you want a hearth in the first place, the surrounding materials have a greater architectural impact. Although you can use materials such as tile and adobe, the natural character of logs suggests the use of natural stone. There are

hundreds of varieties to choose from in a myriad of colours and textures. Consider local stone wherever possible and feature the stone, not the mortar. I have seen beautiful stone facings ruined by overly large mortar joints. Even with freestanding stone attractive stonework will protect surfaces and radiate heat. If you have a small fireplace in your bedroom, a tile surround using slate or other natural materials may be less expensive than stone.

#### **8. Have a generous hearth.**

Here I refer to the area in front of your fireplace or stove. For gas fireplaces keep the hearth flush with the floor. For wood-burning fireplaces I recommend raising it. Raising the firebox offers better viewing. Make sure your hearth extends far enough to contain errant ashes and wood splinters. The hearth should be durable and easy to clean, especially if you anticipate slitting wood on it. I recommend large, flat stone or ceramic pieces for the top of the hearth, preferably a single slab, although the front of a milled hearth can be faced with the same stone as the main fireplace.

#### **9. Choose your mantel style.**

It seems a log mantle over the fireplace is as ubiquitous as the fireplace itself. The half-round log has always been popular, often supported on two logs ends. There are many companies that sell beautifully carved or uniquely featured log mantels.

#### **10. Choose your accessories.**

While a gas fireplace doesn't require much in the way of accessories, a wood-burning fireplace will need an andiron to hold the burning logs and tools to handle them. For open burning fires, you will likely need a brass screen, a broom and a set of bellows. Cast iron fire backs can be placed behind the fire to protect the masonry and absorb and radiate heat. If you don't build wood storage into the hearth enclosure, then consider a wooden box or fabric sling. A recent option for wood burning fireplaces, though not approved in all regions, is a gas starter, which eliminates the need for paper and kindling.

### **11. Design efficient and practical wood storage.**

Work convenient interior and exterior wood storage into your plan from the beginning, not as an afterthought. For wood-burning fireplaces, I prefer to recess a storage area into the stonework next to the firebox. Line it with a durable material such as slate or concrete. Or build two - one for large firewood and one for kindling and paper. In some homes, I have included 'wood' dumb waiters to transport firewood from a basement up to the hearth. If storing firewood in the basement, take measures to avoid potential insect problems. Outdoor pass-throughs also are nice, but they are not always easy to seal and secure.

### **12. Make your hearth an architectural feature with niches and built-ins.**

Consider varying the surfaces of your hearth enclosure, both vertically and horizontally. Create shelves or recesses for displays of art memorabilia or books. You might even line recesses with an accent material such as a different type of stone.

### **13. Light for mood and accent.**

Use a combination of ambient and accent lighting to control moods and highlight the stonework, artwork and displays on mantels, shelves or niches. Put them on dimmers to give more flexibility.

#### **14. Safety comes first.**

Gas appliances are designed to operate safely on their own. For wood-burning fireplaces and stoves, you must take measures to ensure their safe operation. Build your hearth upon a non-combustible surface. Keep the area around the fireplace and chimney clean. Use screens with open fireplaces. Use only seasoned hardwoods or fire logs. Build the fire toward the rear of the firebox and never overload it or leave it unattended. Have a fire extinguisher nearby and, most importantly, have your fireplace and flue inspected annually, and if necessary, cleaned. Also, always draw in outside air for combustion to maintain indoor air quality.

#### **15. Keep it clean.**

Though the annual inspection is key, burning seasoned wood efficiently reduces creosote buildup and the potential for chimney fires. If you are using a fire log, keep the glass doors open to reduce smoking. To remove smoke stains on the glass wipe it with a damp cloth dipped in cooled ashes. Repair any loose or cracked mortar immediately.

Your hearth and surrounding stonework, mantels and accessories can be a significant investment and, certainly, one of your home's best features. By following simple guidelines, you can create a powerful architectural element that gives you enjoyment for years to come.