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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: What trees make for the best firewood? See these tips.

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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With all the downed trees in Augusta, firewood sellers must be struggling. I cut a lot of firewood because I love having fires at my house and I will say this kind of work isn't for everyone.

Moving large logs, hauling chainsaws, lifting wood onto a splitter, sorting the split wood and then moving to it all to store and stack is a lot of work. I love doing it, but I am not in the business of selling it.

It has been mostly warm since the hurricane until recently. I had almost forgotten how much I enjoyed a good old-fashioned chimney fire. My football friends and I got to watch some college football at my house recently and we needed some good heat to keep us from freezing.

Riding the roads like I do, I have almost wanted to pull over about 1,000 times to pick up some well-cut rounds of white oak that are waiting for a ride to Eisenhower Park for a date with a giant grinder. True fireplace lovers know that wood is the best instrument for having fires, but you can't just put any old wood in it and light it. Seasoned hardwood is the best firewood.

In our area, hardwood is considered a tree that usually loses its leaves once a year. This includes trees like oaks, hickory, maple, locust, ash and pecan. Splitting the wood helps release moisture and adds surface area to burn. Once the wood is cut and split, it needs to be stacked, covered, and allowed to dry for about six months.

Always stack firewood off the ground because direct contact with soil will release moisture into the wood it touches and introduce organisms that will cause rotting. Places like Tractor Supply have nice racks to stack wood, but I like to use pressure treated 4x4s for the base.

Make sure to cover just the top to avoid the rain from soaking the firewood while letting the air dry the rest of the pile.

To tell when the wood is seasoned, you can strike two pieces of wood together. If you hear sharp cracking sounds it means that the wood is dry. If the noise is a dull thud, your wood moisture level is still probably high.

Dry wood will also have cracks in the end grain where the cut lines are. Also avoid places like heavy wet shade or some place next to a stream when storing your firewood. Stored wood that stays dry and covered can last many years.

Dense wood is the best wood for firewood. Oaks, ash and hickories are common in our forests, so they work well. Red maples, cottonwood, sycamore and poplar are softer and less dense, so they burn faster with less heat intensity. BTUs are the measure of heat, and an equal amount of hickory will produce close to twice as much heat as cottonwood. Also avoid pine and other conifers in fireplaces.

The standard measure for firewood is the “cord.” This measurement can either be a full cord or a face cord. The full cord is measured by stacking wood 4 feet tall, 8 feet wide and 4 feet deep which also equals 128 cubic feet. The face cord is a stack of wood 4 feet high, 8 feet long and 12 to 18 inches deep.

Campbell Vaughn: Cranberries are more than just a holiday treat. Find out about the bog.

And with fire comes danger. There are some things to consider when having fires in your fireplace. Burning wood that is wet can lead to a buildup of creosote, which is a residue that is highly flammable and can catch fire and burn your house to the ground. Have a professional chimney sweep inspect the fireplace for residue buildup and masonry cracks. If need be, they can clean your chimney of any excess buildup.

Find a screen to put up in front of the fire. Different woods create a certain number of sparks that can fly out and burn things in your house like rugs and you. I have noticed that wild cherries and elms seem to pop a lot when burning. Make sure to put a proper cap on the chimney to keep wildlife out. They don't call the bird the chimney swift because they live in the ground. I have friends that have missed a whole season of fires because they were hosting a family of birds in their chimney and didn't have the heart to smoke them out.

Be careful when cleaning the ashes from last night's fire. The ash dust can be a great insulator for hot coals. These coals can sometimes stay smoldering for days. If you throw those ashes

and coals on a dry bed of leaves outside your back door, you can start a fire.