

Safety precautions are necessary when installing woodstoves

BY SUZANNE KEENE

LANCASTER — Over the last several years many people have installed woodstoves in their homes in an effort to reduce heating costs. However, an increase of woodstove and chimney related house fires has accompanied their efforts.

Last year 35 percent of the house fires in Lancaster County were woodstove or chimney related, Lancaster County fire service coordinator Randall Gockley reports. Throughout the past week, which was designated Fire Prevention Week, Gockley has been spreading the word about how to install and operate woodstoves safely.

The consumer should be careful to select the proper size woodstove for his needs, Gockley advises. If the stove is too big, it will bake the room where it is located, while if it is too small, people may be tempted to try to heat too large an area with it. A reputable dealer can provide advice on the proper size for individual needs.

Once the customer purchases the stove, he is often tempted to cut costs by installing it himself. The problem with this, Gockley warns, is that the consumer often does not realize the amount of heat that the stove and stovepipe can radiate, and therefore does not take the necessary precautions to prevent fires.

"Many times when individuals install it, they do not follow the safety guidelines that they should," Gockley says, estimating that 50 percent of the woodstoves in the county are not installed according to safety guidelines.

The two most common mistakes people make when installing a woodstove, he said, are placing it too close to combustible materials and failing to provide proper clearance and insulation for the stovepipe.

The stove should be at least 36 inches from any combustible material, not up tight against the wall, Gockley advised. The radiant heat produced by the stove could ignite any combustible material that gets too close.

Sheet metal or other non-combustible material should be placed under the stove to offer protection against sparks that may jump out, Gockley said. The floor protection should extend 18 inches on the loading side of the stove and 12 inches on all other sides.

The stovepipe also gives off a lot of radiant heat that can cause a fire if the pipe is installed too close to combustible wall materials. Over a period of years, wood and other combustibles placed near a stovepipe become like charcoal and possess an ignition temperature so low that radiant heat could ignite nearby walls or partitions.

Gockley said that safe installation standards call for 18 inches of open space on all sides of the pipe and a layer of brick, asbestos or other non-combustible material for extra protection.

Chimneys can also become fire hazards when they are not properly maintained. "People don't clean their chimneys often enough," Gockley says.

A chimney should be cleaned at least once a year, or more often if necessary. A stovepipe needs cleaned if it produces a thud instead of a hollow, ringing noise when tapped, Gockley said. The thud indicates a creosote buildup that can eventually completely block the pipe. To check a chimney for creosote, hold a mirror up in the cleanout.

Creosote is a tar-like substance which accumulates inside a chimney because of improper burning. Gockley explained that creosote is formed during the burning of unseasoned or moist wood. If creosote cools before it

leaves the chimney, it transforms from a vapor to a solid form and sticks to the sides of the chimney.

Over a period of time, Gockley said, the creosote can build up until the chimney passage is narrowed or completely blocked and can ignite, causing a chimney fire.

During a chimney fire smoke will back up into the house and flames will shoot from the chimney. It will create a noise similar to a freight train, and the woodstove may visibly shake.

Usually the fire will create enough heat that the creosote will return to its vapor form and the fire will go out, Gockley explained.

However, during that short time when there is a fire, the chimney can be cracked. If this happens, the fireplace should not be used again until it is inspected by a masonry contractor or a stove dealer, Gockley said.

Even though the fire may be over as quickly as it began, Gockley suggests that homeowners call the fire company,

just in case smouldering sparks start another fire.

Gockley said he has seen a clean chimney blocked in as few as 48 hours when unseasoned, wet wood is burning slowly. He recommends that during the winter months, when the stove is used daily, the chimney be checked for creosote at least once a week. The gaskets and seals on woodstoves should also be checked periodically for cracks.

Occasionally, a woodstove can get so hot that it will glow red, creating still another fire hazard, Gockley said. If this should happen, close the damper to slow the

air intake and reduce the temperature of the fire, he advised.

Do not pour water on it, Gockley cautioned, because water will cause the stove to crack. A dry chemical fire extinguisher, which should always be kept near the stove, can also be used.

Today, the last day of Fire Prevention Week, offers an opportunity to review your fire safety practices. Do you have a fire extinguisher next to your stove? Does your woodstove adhere to safety standards? If not, now is the time to make the necessary changes for a safe woodburning season.



Lancaster County fire service coordinator Randall Gockley stands by a woodstove that is part of a fire safety display in the Park City Shopping Mall. Throughout Fire Prevention Week, Gockley has been offering information on how to install and operate woodstoves safely.

BACK HOME



By Michelle S. Rodgers

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Trick or Treat Traditions

Stacks of sweet goodies at the check-out counters remind me that it is time to stock up-not for a snow storm but for the throngs of trick-or-treaters who will soon be masquerading at my front door.

Preparing for this occasion "back home" meant baking and decorating a double batch of delicious gingie cookies decorated like pumpkins. Other memories include the assembling of a costume, carving a jack-o-lantern, and finding the biggest "loot" bag available.

Living on the farm out in the country made trick or treating at four neighbors an entire evening affair. One of the favorite parts of the evening was going to Grandma and Grandpa's house, where they spent considerable time admiring the costumes and guessing who was inside which costume. And of course, with this task accomplished, a treat was dropped into our "loot" bag. One especially memorable Halloween was the year Mom and Dad dressed up too!

At this time many families are busily creating ghosts, goblins, movie stars and super heroes for this year's halloween celebration.

Unfortunately, this fun-filled tradition has become a time when many parents dread the tricks and fear the treats! To ensure that this tradition continues to be a safe and happy one for your family, review these tips.

Make sure costumes are flame-resistant and do not dangle or trail behind the child. Candelit jack-o-lanterns should not be carried by children and should be kept away from doorsteps where trick-or-treaters' costumes might brush against the flame.

Costumes with unaccustomed fullness and extra length, may be ignited more easily because they are cumbersome, or because the sleeves are billowy and full. When selecting costumes, beards, masks or wigs, look for flame resistant labels. If you are making a costume, you can treat it with this flame retardent mixture: Mix seven ounces of Borax and three ounces of Boric acid in two quarters of hot water. Soak the costume and drip dry. This procedure can keep your ghost or goblin from a frightening disaster.

Supervise young children. I believe it is more fun and safer to

go only to homes of people you know. If your children are stopping at homes of people you do not know, ask them not to eat any treats until you can check the "loot". Providing a treat to eat along the way may help to avoid this temptation.

Remember to choose costumes which are light or bright enough to be seen clearly by motorists. Even witches can wear reflective tapes over their gowns and carry flashlights.

If you would like to take the focus off a candy treat, you might try offering one of these ideas this year.

Penny Pumpkins - cut out orange paper pumpkins and with a marking pen draw on a happy grin. Glue on pennies for eyes and nose. (If inflation has hit your neighborhood, try nickles and dimes.)

Halloween Pencils-Take two identical Halloween stickers and stick them back to back near the top of a pencil.

Sugarless Gum-Stick stickers onto pieces of sugarless gum.

Cheese Ghost Snack-Cut a seven-inch cheese log into one-inch sections. Put a popsicle stick into cheese piece. Cover with clear wrap and two white tissues. Smooth the tissues and tie at the "neck" with white yarn. Use a black marker for eyes, nose and mouth.

Even though I have no plans to "dress-up" this year, one tradition will continue. It just wouldn't be Halloween without making the family favorite, Halloween Pumpkins Gingies. I've included the recipe below in case you would like to share in our family tradition.

Halloween Pumpkin Gingies

- 1/2 cup shortening
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 1/2 cup molasses
- 3/4 cup water
- 6 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon allspice
- 1 teaspoon ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon

Mix all of the above ingredients. Chill. Roll out dough to 1/4-inch thickness. Cut with a cookie cutter. Bake at 350 for 15 minutes. Cool and decorate with icing to look like jack-o-lanterns.

Happy Halloween!
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