



Home & Heart



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In the winter, we heat our home with wood. I have been doing this for the last sixteen years, Bob-O for much longer.

As with all mountain-living necessities, there is a learning curve. You have to learn how to start a fire, keep it going, bank it for the night, and clean your woodstove. Then there is cutting the wood, as well as splitting, stacking, and drying it.

Light My Fire

Ever since Prometheus brought fire to man, many people around the world and throughout history have used wood fires for heating and cooking. While some areas of the world have been denuded of trees for cooking fires, many well-forested areas use this renewable resource. There are increasingly efficient ways to burn wood for heating. In some parts of the country, this is the preferred and accepted way to heat homes, as it is in our area.

When I first moved to the mountains, I knew how to light a campfire. My family did a lot of camping when I was a kid, and my father taught us all how to start and maintain campfires. When I was very young, we lived in a house with a potbellied stove. Because I was so young, I was not allowed to touch the stove when a fire was in it. Then I met Bob-O, and using a wood heating stove became a way of life.

Be Kind to Kindling

In order to start a fire in a woodstove, you need dry kindling. You need a goodly amount. Knowing just how much to use with your particular stove comes with experience. It does no good to skimp on kindling. We prefer Douglas-fir, because it splits so nicely. If the wood is pitchy, all the better.

The very best kindling wood is from the stump of a standing snag that has died naturally. When this happens, all the sap drains back down the tree. The rounds taken from the bottom two to three feet of the stump are prime fatwood, wood completely saturated in

pitch. It only takes a few pieces of fatwood to get a fire going. Juniper and pine will make fine kindling. The caveat here is that the wood must be dry. Of course, this is just what's available in this part of the world.

By the way, the swell method of splitting kindling with a hatchet is also the safe way. You take a piece of wood, set the blade of the hatchet on the up-ended top. Hold the wood with one hand and the hatchet with the other. Lift the two together and drop sharply to the chopping block, just enough to plant the hatchet blade about an inch into the top of the wood.

Remove your hand from the wood, lift the hatchet with the wood attached, and drive it down onto the stump, splitting the wood. When you split the wood, you have *one* hand on the hatchet handle, and *none* on the piece of wood.

Making a Wood Stew

The art of burning wood for heat depends on having dry wood. Wood that is too wet yields little heat but lots of creosote. If it's too dry, it will burn too fast.

To start a fire, take four or five pieces of newspaper, wadded loosely. [Editor's Note: Newspaper printed with colored inks should not be used to start stoves equipped with catalytic converters. The metals present in the ink contaminate the catalyst and will result in premature failure.] Place the newspaper on the floor of the firebox. Take your kindling and lay a few pieces on top of the paper at an angle. Place a few more pieces on top of that at the opposite angle, forming an open cross hatch pattern. On top of this, gently lay a couple of slightly larger pieces of kindling parallel to the firebox walls.

Light the paper in several places across the front. Open the damper if you have one. If you don't, instead of completely shutting the stove door, leave it cracked open a little for a few minutes. Never walk away from your woodstove when the door is open.

You should be rewarded with the roar of the paper torching off. When that sound dies down, your kindling should be burning. When the kindling has truly caught fire, start adding larger pieces of wood to the fire. These must be graduated in size.

It would not do to add a big thick split of wood too early. The fire would go out, and you would have to remove all the wood in the stove and start again. This can be very messy, and if a few pieces are just smoldering but not burning, it can be quite smoky. This is experience talking here.

Sometimes your fire will burn down through lack of attention, and you have to revive it. Use the coals as your starter, and place small kindling on top. As that

wood kindles, add the progressively larger wood. If you have pieces of dry bark, it is good to use them for this. They will burn hot and fast, and really kickstart an almost dead fire.

My dad taught me a trick for when you have a smoldering fire that won't flame. He went to a secondhand store and picked up a cheap blow dryer. He disconnected the heater element. The hair dryer was now an electric bellows. It directed a stream of air to right where he wanted it (the area of wood that was smoldering), and got it flaming fast. After I saw his, I got one, and it really works great. It can be kind of messy till you get the hang of not blowing the ashes out of your stove at the same time.

Woodsheds

At our last house, on the Salmon River, we had an ace woodshed. Bob-O and his friend Cedar built it. It was a pole woodshed, 12 feet tall, about 14 feet wide, and 8 feet deep. It had two bays. One bay was for stacked firewood, and the other for stacked kindling rounds, ready to split.

There was enough room on the kindling side for all the wood tools, axes, mauls, hatchets, etc. We always kept back a nice big flat round to be the chopping block. This is what you set the wood on to position it for a good swing of the axe. It also keeps your axe and maul edges sharper longer if you don't hit the ground with them.

Since we moved here to the creek, we have had no woodshed. Every year we set out wood pallets, drive metal fence posts into the ground along the sides, and stack the firewood in between. After curing (drying) the wood during the summer, we cover the stack with a heavy tarp held down with pieces of firewood as weights.

This method has worked, but I have never liked it. I am the person who keeps the home fire burning and fills the wood rack next to the stove from the outdoor ricks. Too many times, in the dead of winter, I have found myself having to balance on ice-covered pallet slats, ducking under the tarp, trying to avoid or escape dumps of icy water or snow sliding off the tarp while I grab an armload of firewood. I'd venture to say that you have not felt real pain until you have clapped your nipple between two pieces of split madrone wood, or dropped one on the instep of your cold foot. The chopping block was out in the elements, without any cover from the harsher weather.

Slow Shedding

This year I told Bob-O that I really wanted a woodshed. Time went by, and we did not have the time to build anything. I suggested one of those metal roofed carports. We looked into it, but the cost was prohibitive.

Time grew short, and we needed to get our firewood in. We were at a local membership shopping warehouse when I saw that they had steel-framed canopies.

These canopies are 10 by 20 feet, with two long sides and one short side, covered by heavy duty, fitted tarps. The peaked roofs were also fitted, and hung over the sides by a foot. The cost was US\$149. I convinced Bob-O that it would work. The tarp material is supposed to last three years. By that time, we will be able to put some metal roofing on it.

I assembled it, with Bob-O helping to lift it onto the side posts. We cut foot-long pieces of 6 by 6 inch, pressure treated wood. We then drilled two holes in each of the eight pieces. After anchoring the side posts to the pieces of 6 by 6 with large wood screws, Bob-O hammered lengths of rebar through both holes in each 6 by 6 to anchor the whole assembly to the ground.

I called the company who made the canopy and ordered another short end section of tarp for US\$25. By enclosing both short ends, one full long side, and two-thirds of the long side facing the house, I have a completely viable woodshed.

The tarps are attached to the steel frame with tarp bungees. Those are funny looking bungee loops with a round knob on the end. I got extras, and double bungeed the corners and put extra bungees on the sides. We drove metal fence posts into the ground on the inside along the short ends of the shed, and threaded wooden pallets onto them to hold the rows of firewood in place.

With four cords of wood—cut, split, and stacked—there is still room for me to walk a wheelbarrow alongside the rick and pick and choose the pieces I want. I use a mixture of sizes for during the day, and some big solid honkers for banking in at night. It reminds me of shopping down the aisle of the market with my basket. When I am washing dishes and I look out my kitchen window, I can see my full woodshed. I think to myself, "That is a thing of beauty."

Of course there are the winds and snows of winter to be anticipated. I have high hopes for the durability of my woodshed. Come Spring, I'll let you know how it has fared the frozen north.

Truck & Stack

For the last few years, we have been buying our wood already cut and split. We take our flatbed trailer behind Bob-O's pickup, and drive about 50 miles to a small but professionally run woodlot. The owner has a self-loading log truck. He gets the otherwise discarded and unused hardwoods from logging operations. Most of it is madrone. Madrone is a hardwood native to the

Northwest. It is solid and heavy when first cut, and splits well when green. It dries fast and burns hot and long with little ash.

The wood is stacked one cord to a row at the woodlot. By stacking it carefully in the truck and trailer, we can get two cords in a single load. Back at home, we stack the wood as we take it out of the pickup. The trailer can't get close to the woodshed, so we unload the wood into the pickup, and drive up to the shed and stack it from there.

Fire & Ice

There is a saying that firewood warms you twice—once when you cut, split, and stack it, and once when you burn it. The problem is that the weather is not cold when you get the wood. This year it happened to be hot—in the 90s or 100s—when we did our wood work. Heaving and stacking the wood, we were downright sweaty more than twice.

But when winter rolls in, there is nothing so wonderful as a good warm woodstove when it is snowing outside. A really special treat is to eat ice cream while sitting in the heat emanating from a woodstove or fireplace. People who live in the Tropics will never know this joy. Marge George, the proprietress of the old Forks of Salmon general store, once told Bob-O that she sold more ice cream in the winter than she ever did in the summer. Oh, those wood burners, they are very wise.

Access

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