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Hearth and Home

FIREPLACES ARE POPULAR, BUT SELECTION DEPENDS ON NEED AND LOCATION

BY PATTI FELDMAN

A FIREPLACE OR FUEL-BURNING STOVE can be a fashionable, functional, and inviting focal point in most any room in a home. Still, not every type is efficient at heating the house. Today there are new options that give buyers the atmosphere they want, without the inefficiency.

Hearth products come in many forms, including gas fireplaces and inserts, wood stoves and inserts, pellet-burning stoves and inserts, ethanol-burning units, and electric fireplaces.

The ideal option depends on where in the house it will be installed, the type of fuel available, the venting the unit will need, and the jurisdiction where you're building or renovating.

Venting options depend on fuel type. Wood-burning fireplaces, stoves, and pellet units require venting, while gas fireplaces may be vented or ventless. Plug-in electric fireplaces, which produce heat with a simulated flame yet stay cool to the touch, do not use vents.

Direct-vent is the most popular type of gas fireplace, eliminating up to 100 percent of combustion exhaust and fumes from a home while retaining 70 percent of the heat. In some installations, direct-vent fireplaces incorporate a fan-powered accessory that allows for zigzagging of the venting through a home, enabling installation of the fireplace in virtually any room.

A ventless fireplace, on the other hand, does not require a flue or chimney and keeps exhaust fumes within the house.

"Ventless fireplaces may be decorative only, or produce some heat and real flames that act like a wood fire but without the smoke or mess," says Arthur Lasky, principal architect at HearthCabinet Ventless Fireplaces.

When considering wood- or pellet-burning inserts in a prefab fireplace, it is important to make sure the chimney is rated for the temperature at which the insert burns. Wood-burning fireplaces produce the most pollution annually, followed by wood stoves and then, much less so, pellet stoves. Gas-burning hearth appliances, which can work on natural gas, propane, or bioethanol, produce the least amount of pollution.

Wood pellets are a cost-effective source of fuel for fireplace inserts or stoves requiring venting. A renewable energy source, the pellets are often made from compressed sawdust. Keep in mind that pellet stoves still need electricity to start the fire, run the blowers, and feed the pellets.

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Blending modern and traditional styling, the Shaker wood stove draws inspiration from classic American furniture. Made of steel, the unit features a firebox measuring 14 inches tall, 16 inches wide, and 12 inches deep. It has an efficiency rating of 78 percent and comes in two models.

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"Pellets are clean-burning and give the ambience of burning wood without the cutting, stacking, and splitting of cord wood, making them a convenient option for homeowners," says Karen Smeltz, brand marketing director for Harman. "Ideally, pellet appliances are installed on an outside wall and vent straight out the back with use of a direct-vent wall pass-through."

These days, builders and remodelers may choose bioethanol, a non-traditional hearth option that burns denatured alcohol made from organic sources. The byproduct of the combustion process is carbon dioxide and water vapor. Advocates of the technology point out that appliances that burn bioethanol generate the same amount of CO_2 as the creation of the plants the fuel came from, making them an environmentally friendly option.

Specifying a fireplace is not as simple as picking a style, a fuel, and a venting option. Builders also need to consider venting from an installation standpoint, says John Crouch, director of public affairs for the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association. "In very complex custom homes, it is not unheard of for a designer to underestimate or misunderstand the venting requirements