

Heating With Wood

Many Nebraskans use firewood as a supplemental heat source, but to use wood effectively it is important to understand tree species characteristics and the wood they produce.

Species Characteristics

Firewood, from different species or types of trees, varies widely in heat content, burning characteristics and overall quality. The table below presents several important burning characteristics for most species used in Nebraska.

Green weight is the weight of a cord of freshly cut wood before drying. Dry weight is the weight of a cord after air drying. Green firewood may contain 50 percent or more water by weight. Green wood produces less heat because heat must be used to boil off this water before combustion can occur. Green wood also produces more smoke and creosote than dry wood. Firewood always should be purchased dry or allowed to dry before burning.

Dry wood may cost more than green wood because it produces more heat and is easier to handle.

A wood's dry weight per volume, or density, is important because denser or heavier wood contains more heat per volume. Osage-orange is the densest firewood available in Nebraska. It contains almost twice the heat by volume as cottonwood, one of our lightest woods. It is best to buy or gather dense woods such as oak, ash or mulberry.

Hardwoods, or woods from broad-leaved trees, tend to be denser than softwoods, or woods from conifers. Some firewood dealers sell "mixed hardwood" firewood. This may or may not be desirable, depending on the proportion of low-density hardwoods, such as cottonwood, that are included.

The amount of heat per cord of dry wood is presented in the table below. Heat content is shown as a percent of dry green ash, a common Nebraska firewood.

Values above 100 signify higher heat content than green ash and values below 100 lower heat content.

The table also contains information on other characteristics that determine firewood quality. Ease of splitting is important because larger pieces of wood usually must be split for good drying and burning.

Fragrance and tendency to smoke and spark are most important when wood is burned in a fireplace. Woods that spark or pop can throw embers out of an open fireplace and cause a fire danger. Conifers tend to do this more because of their high resin content.

Woods that form coals are good to use in wood stoves because they allow a fire to be carried overnight effectively.

Firewood Volume

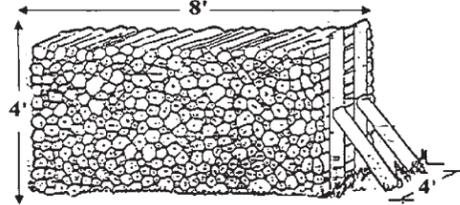
Though firewood dry weight is important for determining heat content, firewood is normally bought and sold by volume.

The most common unit of firewood volume is the cord, also known as a standard or full cord. A cord is an evenly stacked pile containing 128 cubic feet of wood and air space.

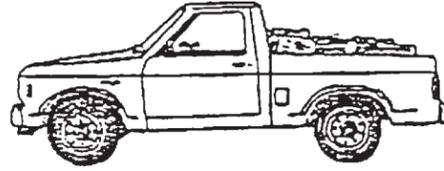
Though a cord can be piled in any shape, a standard cord is generally thought of as a stack of wood 4 feet tall, 8 feet long and 4 feet deep. To figure the number of cords in another size or shape pile, determine the pile's cubic foot volume and divide by 128. A randomly piled stack of wood generally will contain more air and less wood than one neatly piled.

Some dealers sell wood by the face cord or short cord. A face cord is a stack of wood 4 feet high, 8 feet long, and as deep as the pieces are long. Pieces are commonly 12 to 18 inches long, so a face cord may contain 32 to 48 cubic feet of wood and air.

Another common firewood measure is the pickup load. This is an imprecise



A standard (or full) cord is 4 feet tall, 8 feet long and 4 feet deep.



A full-size pickup with a standard bed can hold about 1/2 of a standard cord.

but common measure. A full-size pickup with a standard bed can hold about 1/2 of a full cord, or 64 cubic feet, when loaded even with the top of the bed. Small pickups hold much less. Random loading will decrease this amount further.

A randomly piled stack or pickup load of wood will contain more air and less wood than one neatly stacked. Crooked, small diameter, and knotty or branchy pieces also reduce the amount of wood in a pile.

Buying Firewood

Species, volume, dryness and need for splitting should be considered when buying firewood. Before buying firewood, it's important to learn the basics to become an informed buyer, but knowing your dealer is the best way to ensure that you are getting the best firewood value for your money.

Sources:

- Mike Kuhns and Tom Schmidt, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension NebGuide, "Heating With Wood I. Species Characteristics and Volumes," <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1858&context=extensionhist>
- Mike Kuhns and Tom Schmidt, Utah State University Cooperative Extension, "Heating With Wood I. Species Characteristics and Volumes," <http://forestry.usu.edu/htm/forest-products/wood-heating>

FIREWOOD CHARACTERISTICS

| Species | Weight (lb/cord) | | Heat per Cord (Million BTUs) | % of Green Ash | Ease of Splitting | Smoke | Sparks | Coals | Fragrance | Overall Quality |
|-------------------------|------------------|------|------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|--------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|
| | Green | Dry | | | | | | | | |
| Apple | 4850 | 3888 | 27.0 | 135 | Medium | Low | Few | Good | Excellent | Excellent |
| Ash, Green | 4184 | 2880 | 20.0 | 100 | Easy | Low | Few | Good | Slight | Excellent |
| Alder | | 2540 | 17.5 | | Easy | | Moderate | Good | Slight | |
| Ash, White | 3952 | 3472 | 24.2 | 121 | Medium | Low | Few | Good | Slight | Excellent |
| Basswood (Linden) | 4404 | 1984 | 13.8 | 69 | Easy | Medium | Few | Poor | Good | Fair |
| Birch | 4312 | 2992 | 20.8 | 104 | Medium | Medium | Few | Good | Slight | Fair |
| Boxelder | 3589 | 2632 | 18.3 | 92 | Difficult | Medium | Few | Poor | Slight | Fair |
| Buckeye, Horsechestnut | 4210 | 1984 | 13.8 | 69 | Medium | Low | Few | Poor | Slight | Fair |
| Catalpa | 4560 | 2360 | 16.4 | 82 | Difficult | Medium | Few | Good | Bad | Fair |
| Cedar, Red | | 2060 | 13.0 | | Easy | Low | Many | Poor | slight | Fair |
| Cherry | 3696 | 2928 | 20.4 | 102 | Easy | Low | Few | Excellent | Excellent | Good |
| Coffeetree, Kentucky | 3872 | 3112 | 21.6 | 108 | Medium | Low | Few | Good | Good | Good |
| Cottonwood | 4640 | 2272 | 15.8 | 79 | Easy | Medium | Few | Good | Slight | Fair |
| Dogwood | | 4230 | High | | Difficult | | Few | Fair | | |
| Douglas-fir | 3319 | 2970 | 20.7 | 103 | Easy | High | Few | Fair | Slight | Good |
| Elm, American | 4456 | 2872 | 20.0 | 100 | Difficult | Medium | Few | Excellent | Good | Fair |
| Elm, Siberian | 3800 | 3020 | 20.9 | 105 | Difficult | Medium | Few | Good | Fair | Fair |
| Fir, White | 3585 | 2104 | 14.6 | 73 | Easy | Medium | Few | Poor | Slight | Fair |
| Hackberry | 3984 | 3048 | 21.2 | 106 | Easy | Low | Few | Good | Slight | Good |
| Hemlock | | 2700 | 19.3 | | Easy | | Many | Poor | Good | |
| Honeylocust | 4640 | 3832 | 26.7 | 133 | Easy | Low | Few | Excellent | Slight | Excellent |
| Juniper, Rocky Mountain | 3535 | 3150 | 21.8 | 109 | Medium | Medium | Many | Poor | Excellent | Fair |
| Locust, Black | 4616 | 4016 | 27.9 | 140 | Difficult | Low | Few | Excellent | Slight | Excellent |
| Maple, Other | 4685 | 3680 | 25.5 | 128 | Easy | Low | Few | Excellent | Good | Excellent |
| Maple, Silver | 3904 | 2752 | 19.0 | 95 | Medium | Low | Few | Excellent | Good | Fair |
| Mulberry | 4712 | 3712 | 25.8 | 129 | Easy | Medium | Many | Excellent | Good | Excellent |
| Oak, Bur | 4960 | 3768 | 26.2 | 131 | Easy | Low | Few | Excellent | Good | Excellent |
| Oak, Red | 4888 | 3528 | 24.6 | 123 | Medium | Low | Few | Excellent | Good | Excellent |
| Oak, White | 5573 | 4200 | 29.1 | 146 | Medium | Low | Few | Excellent | Good | Excellent |
| Osage-orange | 5120 | 4728 | 32.9 | 165 | Easy | Low | Many | Excellent | Excellent | Excellent |
| Pine, Ponderosa | 3600 | 2336 | 16.2 | 81 | Easy | Medium | Many | Fair | Good | Fair |
| Pine, Lodgepole | | 2610 | 21.1 | | Easy | | Many | Fair | Good | Fair |
| Pine, White | | 2250 | 15.9 | | Easy | | Moderate | Poor | Good | |
| Poplar | | 2080 | Low | | Easy | | Many | Fair | Bitter | |
| Redcedar, Eastern | 2950 | 2632 | 18.2 | 91 | Medium | Medium | Many | Poor | Excellent | Fair |
| Spruce | 2800 | 2240 | 15.5 | 78 | Easy | Medium | Many | Poor | Slight | Fair |
| Sycamore | 5096 | 2808 | 19.5 | 98 | Difficult | Medium | Few | Good | Slight | Good |
| Walnut, Black | 4584 | 3192 | 22.2 | 111 | Easy | Low | Few | Good | Good | Excellent |
| Willow | 4320 | 2540 | 17.6 | 88 | Easy | Low | Few | Poor | Slight | Poor |

Don't Create a Firewood Haven for Rodents and Insects

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The big woodpile that gives you such a feeling of snug security going into winter may also shelter rodents and insects, and may even provide them an opportunity to spend the cold season under your roof.

Prevent Rodent Problems

Where and how you stack the wood is the key. Mice and rats will readily take shelter in firewood if conditions are right. If the woodpile is located some distance from the house, so rodents have to cross a wide expanse of open lawn, they're likely either to stay near the woodpile or move on. If the wood is stacked next to the house, however, it enables them to search in perfect safety for an opening through which they can squeeze into your house.

It doesn't have to be a very big opening — a mouse can squeeze through a hole 1/4 inch in diameter, and a rat needs only a 1/2 inch hole. Both rats and mice can climb any surface rough enough to give them a toehold, so openings need not be at or below ground level to give them entrance. Provide rodents with a sheltered woodpile right next to the house, and they'll be able to take as much time as necessary to find an entryway.

Provide them with a supply of food, too, and your rodent problem can get serious very quickly. Food can be in the form of easily accessible garbage, a poorly managed compost pile, wild bird food in flimsy containers, crop residues in the vegetable garden or dog food.

The worst place for firewood storage is right next to the house, and the next worst place is next to the dog pen. Spilled and leftover food, and the dog's water dish provide rodents all they need in addition to shelter.

Keep the Insects Outside

You may unwittingly bring insects inside along with firewood. Wood is the natural home for carpenter ants, termites, wood-boring beetles and countless other insects and spiders. Except for carpenter ants and termites, which can seriously damage your home, most of these insects are more nuisance than threat.

But as long as wood is properly handled and stored, insect emergence in the home can be avoided. If wood is kept below 50°F, insects living in it will remain dormant. However, if it's taken indoors and allowed to warm up, insect activity resumes and they may emerge in the home.

The best way to avoid invasion is to store the wood outside in the cold until it's ready to be burned. Bring in only a small amount of wood at a time, the amount of wood you'll use in a day or two. Any wood containing big black carpenter ants or termites should be taken back outside and burned. Other insects brought out of firewood by the warmth inside your home are a nuisance rather than an emergency and can be collected with a vacuum cleaner.

Store wood away from the house and under a cover, such as in a woodshed, unheated garage, utility building or under a sheet of plastic or sheet metal roofing to keep it dry. Leave an air space between the wood and covering.