

Outdoor Fireplaces – the **Hottest** Trend

Fomeowners spent \$50 billion in 2005 enhancing their outdoor living spaces. The hottest items to fill these spaces were outdoor cooking units – and we're not talking grills. Outdoor fireplaces are the latest trend. Choose the unit that's right for you.

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Humanity has been fascinated with fire since its discovery. Its warmth and comfort is nourishing, and its random dancing and constant movement can be absolutely mesmerizing. It is not surprising that over half of all U. S. households (55 million) have at least one fireplace or freestanding stove. What might be surprising, however, is the large number of people who are leaving their warm cocoons and heading outdoors to their outside fireplaces to cook, congregate, and enjoy its ambiance.

This fascination with the outdoor fireplace actually represents a smaller piece of the bigger fascination – the outdoor living room. The outdoor living room includes a fireplace or fire pit, a cooking station, and comfortable furniture and is something Americans have been investing increasingly large sums of money in for the last decade. In a 2005 survey taken by the Hearth, Patio & Barbeque Association, Americans spent nearly \$150 billion^[1] on home remodeling and one-third of that went towards outdoor living areas. The survey also showed that 80 percent of Americans feel that an outdoor living space is important to them. And while 35 percent already have one, 34 percent are planning to design one in the next few years, at which point, 67 percent plan to purchase an outdoor fireplace or pit.^[2] The American Society of Landscape Architects confirms this: Fire pits and outdoor fireplaces top their list of biggest trends for 2007.^[3] Bottom line – sales of outside fireplaces are blazing.

Who can have one?

Anyone can have an outside fireplace. Prices and styles fit the whole gamut of purses and needs – from your very basic to the most extravagant.

- The chiminea is the least expensive with clay ones starting as low as \$200 and cast iron or aluminum ones at \$400 or less (the aluminum is usually a bit less expensive).
- The fire pit is the newest of the outdoor heating appliances, and prices start around \$600 for permanent units and \$120 for portable ones.
- The built-in fireplace is probably the unit we all want to have, but beware – these outdoor fireplaces come with lots of maintenance. Prices can run upwards of \$10,000, and homeowners don't always get a return on their investment at the sale of their home. However, none of these downsides seem to minimize their appeal; some of them can be real masterpieces.

Laws and regulations

Backyard fireplaces are a relatively new phenomenon, and regulations governing them vary from state to state and town to town. Outdoor fireplaces have created a myriad of situations in which towns are forced to make decisions – or have the voters do it. For example, a homeowner in Cleveland, Ohio, filed a complaint with the town stating that his neighbor's 14-foot-tall fireplace was blocking his view and might even be a safety hazard. The town required the owner to get a permit, but the variance that was needed was denied because the \$8,000 structure was too high. The City Council overturned the Commission's decision and left it up to the voters to approve or outlaw outdoor fireplaces.

While oversized chimneys are a valid focal point at a town meeting, the more common issues towns are dealing with have to do with safety. After a few clicks on Google, the hazardous potential that comes

with these burning units is obvious. The woman who fell into an illegal open, unguarded fire pit in a California restaurant is tragic as is the online story about the family who sustained \$50-\$60,000 in damages as the result of the fire pit they were using on a wooden deck. Although patio stones had been placed underneath the fire pit, the heat of the fire caught on the deck boards. Be cautious!

While some towns lag behind others in their attempts at dealing with outdoor fireplaces, others have already dotted all their i's and crossed all their t's. Many towns require residents to obtain burning permits for all outside burning units. They're also establishing minimum distances between the unit and dwelling: some towns require 10 feet, others 15 feet, still others want more. It's going to be an evolving process and will likely go through lots of changes. In addition, many communities require that the fire pit be fully enclosed, meaning that it must have both a side and a top – no open fires.

Always check with your local building and fire inspector for town requirements.

Which type suits you – and your budget?

Chimineas

These pot-bellied free-standing outdoor units, originally made of clay, are probably the oldest type of outdoor fire (aside from the traditional campfire). They originated many hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago in Mexico and were designed to protect the family's fire from rain. Chimineas provided warmth and were also used for cooking and baking.

While clay chimineas are perfect for Mexico's climate (low rainfall with not-too-low temperatures), they are not suitable for all climates and have been known to crack with rapid temperature changes. Even under the best of circumstances, clay chimineas will eventually experience breakage. Clay absorbs moisture, and when moisture permeates clay, it begins to crumble. Proper maintenance is critical to keeping a clay chiminea in good shape.

Many chiminea sellers will not even carry clay products and claim that clay chimineas are a fire hazard because of their susceptibility to breakage. One such online company reports on a man from Jacksonville, Florida, who actually had the bottom fall out of his clay chiminea while he was using it! The resulting fire destroyed his house. However, before you go running to the iron chiminea dealers, realize that there have been reports that the bottoms have fallen out of those too. (Remember, for added safety and to comply with town regulations, chimineas must be placed on top of a fireproof platform.)

Clay chimineas are ceramic products, and they should be used with caution. For those who choose to go with clay, be careful – and choosy. High-quality chimineas are not easy to produce. Firing techniques, fresh molds, and good paint applications are critical, so do your research. As with most things, you usually get what you pay for. And once you do acquire one, take care of it. Read the instructions. A good quality clay chiminea will fall apart as easily as a cheaper one if it's not properly maintained.

Lots of companies are pushing the cast iron and aluminum chimineas over their clay cousins because of the problem with breakage, but caution must be exercised again. A cast iron chiminea gets blistering hot and can cause serious injury if you are not careful (invest in a pair of long-sleeved gloves – and wear them, regardless of the type of chiminea you buy). Extreme care needs to be taken especially when opening the door and adding firewood. As with any fireplace, it needs to be supervised at *all* times.

Note that cast iron that's exposed to the elements will rust; however, painting and an occasional sanding will extend its longevity. And the more solid the iron (you don't want a lot of sheet steel – so ask before you buy), the longer it will last.

You don't like sanding the rust off iron? Then buy a cast aluminum chiminea. They are the easiest to maintain of all the chimineas, and they look better longer and weigh considerably less than the cast iron. You will be able to relocate it much more easily if your backyard plans change.

Safety

- Have fire extinguishers on hand.
- Do NOT use chimineas inside the house, on a wooden deck (check with your town), or

in an enclosed porch or gazebo.

- Do NOT use lighter fluid or gasoline. Use fire starters.
- Before you start stacking up the fire, get comfortable with your chiminea.
- Do not burn treated wood, pellets, or charcoal (and, of course, never burn toxic materials).
- An iron chiminea will heat up fast! **Be careful.** Invest in a pair of long-sleeved gloves.
- Place the chiminea in a spot that is clear of hanging trees, branches, brushes, or anything else that is flammable, an overhang, for example.
- Position the chiminea on a **flat and fireproof surface** (rock, concrete, bricks).
- Make sure there is no combustible material around the chiminea.
- Never leave the fire unattended. Also, make sure it is completely extinguished before going in for the night.

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CAUTION

- Make sure your chiminea is supported by a noncombustible surface. There have been reports of the bottoms falling out of both clay and metal chimineas.
- Be extremely careful when opening the front grill when a fire is in progress. Ensure that a noncombustible surface extends out from the front of the chiminea to protect the area from sparks and hot ashes.

Caring for your chiminea

- A cast iron chiminea needs to be either **cured** or **painted**. Cure an unpainted chiminea with vegetable oil (like you would any cast iron cookware) every ten or twelve firings. This will keep it rust free. If you choose to paint, use a wire brush to remove the rust, then apply a fire resistant primer and paint.
- For clay chimineas, use a sealer twice a year to help preserve the finish.
- Do not drop a clay chiminea. It will break!
- Starting a fire in a chiminea under heavy moisture saturation conditions can damage a clay chiminea. Exercise caution.
- Some chiminea lovers prefer to enjoy the beauty of their chimineas and leave them uncovered; however, placing a cover over a clay one (once it has cooled) will protect it from water and UV rays, and covering an iron chiminea will reduce the rusting.
- Clean your chiminea: Clean out the ashes with a small shovel. Then remove the rocks, put them in a bucket, and rinse them off with water. After the rocks are dry, put them back into the bowl of the chiminea. If you're using sand instead of rocks, just take out the excessive ashes and turn over the sand.

Which one is right for you?

	Clay		Cast Iron		Cast Aluminum	
Safety	Clay does not get as hot as cast iron	✓	Gets very hot		Gets very hot	
Durability	Breaks easily		Won't crack or break as easily	✓	Won't crack or break as easily	✓
Maintenance	Needs regular maintenance		Rust-prevention maintenance	✓	Almost no maintenance	✓
Life expectancy	Depends on maintenance		Long lasting (if it's solid iron)	✓	Long lasting	✓
Weight			Very heavy (120 to 170 pounds)		Much lighter than clay or aluminum	✓
Assembly	No assembly required	✓	2 to 6 hours of assembly; may need to drill holes		2 to 6 hours of assembly; may need to drill holes	
Variety	Comes in many varieties	✓	Many companies use the same supplier		Many companies use the same supplier	

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Firepits

Firepits are only a few years old, but are very popular. The fire pit radiates heat in a 360-degree circle, as opposed to the chiminea which projects heat from only one side. The fire pit, due to its circular heat, comes closest in style to the traditional campfire.

Safety

Although fire pits can be enjoyable, they can also be quite dangerous, especially the portable types. Not all towns have firm outdoor fireplace regulations yet, so it's up to homeowners, in many cases, to ensure that their fire pit is being used safely and that it is not putting any structures in danger.

Placing inflammable material (for example, patio blocks) underneath the fire pit does not make it safe for use on either a wooden or composite deck. Extreme caution needs to be used with portable fire pits. Keep them away from combustibles and at least 10 feet away (if not more) from the house.

When using a fire pit, always use common sense, follow the manufacturer's directions, and find out what the town requirements are. The following can serve as a guide:

- Do NOT use fire pits in the house, too close to the house, on the grass, or near anything that could catch fire (check with your town).
- For added safety, choose a fire pit that is **protected on all sides**.
- Do NOT use lighter fluid or gasoline. Use fire starters.
- Always have fire extinguishers on hand.
- For wood burning fire pits, **start fires slowly**.
- Do not stack the wood too high. This will keep the wood from falling out.
- Keep the fire pit **at least 10 feet** away from your home (check with your town; some towns require more distance).
- Keep the fire pit adequately away from outdoor furniture.
- Keep the fire pit away from **combustibles**.

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