

Is Your Firepit Legal?

Ghostwriting for Mike Holmes' syndicated Make It Right column

by Marni Andrews

I understand the appeal of a backyard fire pit. It can give you a cottage feel without any of the upkeep. Nothing more caveman than real fire. But building one can be a DIY nightmare.

A fire pit is a grownup's campfire, nice looking and contained so it doesn't start your house on fire. Check fire code, ordinances and permit requirements for your municipality. Open fires are illegal in many areas. There could be restrictions on type of fuel that can be used as well. Most rural areas will allow outdoor fires.

You definitely want to keep a fire pit far away from any building overhangs, nearby trees, and from the house in general (as well as your neighbours). Check the location of underground pipes and cables before digging. While you're at it, don't forget to check that homeowner's policy to see if a fire pit will require changes to the policy. Better to check before than have a project halted midway by an inspector.

Do It Yourselfers get themselves in trouble by getting in over their head. One way is by using the wrong materials. Trouble is, with a fire pit, the damage can be very real. The wrong kinds of brick or stone can explode, which can have terrible consequences. So don't even think of attempting this project yourself. It's just not worth it.

Your contractor can help with determining the budget. Wall material from rocks to retaining blocks or bricks vary in cost. If you mix materials, you'll be able to save some money, maybe by using bricks or blocks for the lower layers and nice rocks for the final layer. Cast concrete blocks molded to look like stone offer savings and they're flat on top and bottom to stack neatly. Buying sand and gravel in bulk rather than in bags is much more cost effective.

Find a completely level, clear piece of ground to start. Outline the proposed size on the ground with a garden hose and step back from it. Walk away to be sure the location is good from all angles and in proportion to the yard. For large sticks and brush, you'll want a pit at least 1.25 meters in diameter.

As important as determining size and placement is determining the prevailing wind pattern. Imagine locating a fire pit so that the smoke constantly blows into the house.

An option to consider is installing a gas line to provide an easily regulated flame. Installing a line will generally be regulated and may require a permit but it may prove so handy that you'll never end up using wood. Homeowners who love their gas fires don't miss the drifting embers and smoke not to mention mucking out the fire pit every time. But gas is a tradeoff against the satisfying crackle and smell of a real wood fire.

A well-made fire pit should start with a base buried below ground in a hole lined with gravel. This provides a level platform for the wall, drainage and protection against winter heaving. A final above-ground height of about a foot is good for containing a fire while also providing a comfortable foot rest. As a precaution, lining the fire pit with a thick steel ring will ensure a more contained fire and protects the concrete in the blocks from drying out prematurely.

A variety of materials can be used as starter, kindling and fuel. The most eco-friendly is what's already in your backyard. Dried pruning, leaves and even evergreen cones make good fire starters. Any seasoned garden shrubbery or timber, dried ideally for a year, will be good fuel. There are even log maker kits that start with a newspaper capsule you can stuff with organic matter such as teabags, sawdust, nut shells, twigs, leaves and the like that will burn for up to an hour.

Once the fire pit is built, you'll want to take proper care of it to ensure lots of fun evenings. After every use, remove the burnt ashes. This will allow oxygen to get into the bottom of the pit for a better burning fire and will reduce oxidation.

It's a good idea to build the fire pit within reach of the garden hose just in case things get out of hand. Better to be safe than sorry! Now go stock up on wieners, marshmallows and the carbonated stuff.