

Chimneys rate a thought as cold approaches.

By GARY C. RUMMLER --of The Journal Staff

CHIMNEYS need to be cleaned. But how often? And why? Do some chimneys need more attention than others? What should or should not be burned in a fireplace? How much does chimney upkeep cost? If a chimney isn't cleaned, will the house burn down?

And how do you select a chimney sweep and know the job is getting done? After all, personal inspection is a bit awkward for anyone weighing over 10 pounds.

Howard Rowell, owner of The Royal Chimney Sweep, and Bill Hussel, president of Chimney Doctors - representing two of the many Milwaukee-area firms that clean chimneys - offered some ideas.

How often should chimneys be inspected?

Rowell said chimneys for woodburning fireplaces should be inspected annually and those for furnaces every couple of years. Hussel suggested a cleaning and inspection for every 1/2 of a cord or more of wood burned, or every three years to be inspected even if you do not burn often, whichever comes first. For furnace chimneys, he suggested every five or ten years.

Build up of creosote, an oily byproduct of combustion, is the main problem in chimneys because it can catch fire. Wood fires create almost none. However, regular inspections - done by shining lights into the chimney or by lowering a video camera inside - also pinpoint cracked or shifting flue tiles, or birds, squirrels and raccoons that prefer chimneys to drafty tree nests during Wisconsin winters.

The new high-efficiency wood burners often placed inside fireplaces actually increase the need for inspection because creosote builds up 10 times faster in those chimneys, Hussel said.

"The insert is basically a device that pulls 70% to 80% of the heat from the wood and brings it into the room," Hussel said. "But the problem is there is not much heat that goes up the chimney

anymore and because of the reduced heat, the creosote condenses on the inside of the chimney."

How is a chimney cleaned and does all that soot end up in the house?

Basically, cleaning is done from the top and from the bottom. Wire brushes with extension rods in 5-foot sections are lowered into the chimney from the top. Hand brushes are used to scrub and brush the firebox, where the fire is built and the smoke chamber where smoke goes before it heads up the chimney. A vacuum is kept running to suck up everything brushed out.

If flue tiles are cracked, how is the chimney repaired?

Essentially, it isn't. It's tough finding people skinny enough to climb inside chimneys. Instead, a stainless steel tube is inserted the full length of the chimney and an insulating mix is poured around it to keep it warmer. This combination substantially reduces future creosote build-up. Cracked tiles are a hazard because the heat barrier provided by the tiles has been compromised.

What should and should not be burned in a chimney?

Creosote, is much higher in unseasoned wood and in high pitch woods like pine and spruce, so these should be avoided. Burn hardwood like oak and hickory although, some birch can be used to get the fire going. Also, use only wood that has been drying out at least six months - if the ends are not cracked, the wood is not dry enough.

Do not burn any type of painted wood, which can give off toxic fumes. Avoid any wood like plywood or wafer board that is put together with glue. A minimal amount of paper is OK to start a fire, but avoid glossy paper or paper with colored printing. Large amounts of paper like Christmas gift-wrappings should not be burned because it creates a large flame that can reach creosote deposits and start a fire.

A key: the top of the flame always should be visible.

If you do have a fire inside your chimney will your house burn down?

Probably not, but damage could occur. The problem is that creosote burns very hot -2100 degrees - and there is no way to put it out.

Pouring water down a chimney would crack it from top to bottom. Fire damages the flue tiles and the stainless steel insert becomes a necessity.

Sometimes a fire can damage tile, but be so small that the owner is unaware of the fire.

Are there guidelines for selecting a chimney sweep?

Both Hussel and Rowell are members of the National Guild of Chimney Sweeps, and they suggest any sweep should belong to the guild because it tests prospective members on their knowledge of chimneys before certifying them.

Both also are members of the Milwaukee chapter of the National Home Improvement Council, which they also see as an indication of quality workmanship. It also was suggested that a call to the Better Business Bureau would be appropriate and that proof of full liability insurance be required.

How much does it all cost?

Expect to pay between \$159 and \$179 for routine cleaning. An inspection without cleaning costs about \$79.

How do you keep birds and animals from nesting in your chimney?

Every chimney should have a cap that includes heavy wire mesh. Insist on a stainless steel cap. Animals can rip off aluminum caps. Rowell said he removes about 25 squirrels and 125 raccoons every fall - all dislodged by poking at them from below. Caps cost about \$125 to \$195, depending on the size.