

Buying Guide: Fireplaces

By: Paula McCooey, Photo by Bruno Schlumberger, Canwest News Service



With the frosty winter season edging closer, it's time to turn up the heat on your search for the perfect **fireplace**. Whether it's **wood-burning, gas, electric or pellet**, it's important to ask the right questions to ensure you get the proper size, style and model to fit your spacious home or compact condo.

Over the years, options have grown exponentially. Today, consumers can buy an electric unit for a few hundred bucks or splurge on a glitzy high-end model worth several thousand dollars.

Recent trends show fireplaces are doing double-duty as art with linear models placed high on the wall. For extra bling, standard faux logs are being replaced with crushed glass, rocks, bamboo and sand - even Swarovski crystals.

To help narrow the options, here are five burning issues to keep in mind:

Brawn or beauty?

If lowering your **heating bill** is more important than the look of the fireplace, the more efficient the unit, the better. Andy Cotnam, general manager of the Fireplace Centre & Patio Shop in Ottawa, recommends buying a unit with a 65- to 80-per-cent efficiency rate.

Put simply, the more efficient the unit, the more heat that remains in the home and isn't sucked out the chimney. Cotnam says the amount of energy savings depends on the location of the fireplace, the layout of the home, and how well the home is insulated. He estimates consumers can save 20 to 50 per cent on their heating bill with a high-efficient fireplace.

On the flip side, Mike Pilon, owner of Romantic Fireplaces & BBQ Inc., in Orleans, ON, says with so many high-efficiency furnaces heating homes, many consumers are more interested in chic fireplaces that create "emotion."

What's the difference between an insert and full fireplace?

Be it wood, gas, electric or pellet, an insert is "something that people buy to put into an existing fireplace," says Cotnam. A full fireplace is just that: a new fireplace where there wasn't one before, he says.

Will the fireplace work during a power failure as a backup heat source?

The old faithful wood-burning fireplace will always work, but without hydro, the electric fan used to circulate the heat on a gas fireplace won't. Pellet stoves, which burn waste wood compressed into small pellets, also need power to operate.

What about the fireplace warranty?

The life of the warranty depends on the manufacturer. Cotnam recommends reading the fine print to find out what's covered and what's not. Typically, gas and electrical components are covered by a one-year warranty, he says.

Traditional or contemporary design? Pilon says the market is moving toward contemporary fireplaces with a wow factor. "(People) want it to look great and they want to feel good when they are sitting in front of their fire," he says.

The once-ubiquitous brass is taking a back seat to pewters, irons and more natural finishes, says Cotnam. To help choose a style that best suits your taste, he says you need to ask yourself: "Is this the correct esthetics? Is this going to fit into my decor?"