Though we are just at the beginning of summer, now is the time to look ahead to next winter — at least when it comes to firewood. A little care now will yield more heating value for less money in the fall.

The standard measure for wood is a cord, but most people don’t know exactly how much that is. It is a measure of tightly stacked wood that is 128 cubic feet, or 4 feet high by 4 feet deep by 8 feet long. You also might hear people refer to a fireplace cord or a face cord. This means 4 feet high and 8 feet long, but only the depth of one 16-inch piece of firewood. This is about 1/3 of a standard cord. When someone offers to sell you a truckload, the amount of wood depends on the size of the truck and how it is stacked.

Make sure you know what volume of wood that you are purchasing.

Wood costs vary greatly. A quick look in the newspaper and on Craigslist ranged from $180 to $300 a cord. To compare prices you must check the type of wood, stage of dryness (seasoning) and the shape of the final product (split or rounds).

The stage of dryness is of particular importance here in the Interior. Newly cut wood has a high level of moisture and is difficult to burn. Wet wood does not produce as much heat as dry wood and it doesn’t burn clean. The fine particulate produced from unseasoned wood is particularly harmful to those who have difficulties breathing. Burning unseasoned wood produces less heat and contributes to air quality problems.

How do you know if the wood is dried? Firewood should have 20 percent moisture content or less when burned, or a large amount of heat generated from burning the wood is used to dry the wood as it burns. Burning wet firewood is inefficient and increases creosote buildup in the chimney. Wet wood is heavier than dry wood, so simply lifting it may give you a clue. Also, examine the end grain of the log chunk or piece of firewood. Seasoned, dry wood is checked or cracked on each end. The grain is open.

If the wood you are buying is unseasoned, plan to leave it this winter to dry before you burn it. The best method to dry wood is to split it to expose more surface, cover the top (not the end) with a tarp or board, and stack it loosely. Leave the end grain open to air
movement. Most experts recommend at least six months for seasoning. However, different environmental conditions will hasten or slow down the seasoning process. A sloped roof shed with recycled pallet flooring and open sides makes an ideal wood shed for drying your winter’s wood and keeping it “stove ready” for cost-efficient heating. A 16-foot by 12-foot pole shed that has a tarped, sloped roof of 6 feet to 8 feet tall could store up to nine cords of cut, split and stacked firewood that is protected from moisture. Keep your wood shed at least 30 feet away from your home to provide defensible space from wildfire.

The type of wood will give you another clue as to the amount of heat it will produce. Less dense woods have less material for combustion and may require two cords to produce the same amount of heat as one cord of heavier, denser wood. Some examples of low-heat firewoods are cottonwood, willow and popular. When seasoned, they weigh only about half as much as denser species, even though their high-moisture content when green may suggest they are denser than they are. Because they burn quickly and are easy to split, they are good for kindling.

Birch gives the most BTUs (a measure of heat produced) per cord at more than 23 million. Cottonwood only produces about 14 million BTUs. White Spruce checks in at 18 million BTUs and black spruce at almost 16 million. So, if you can get a cord of birch at the same cost as a cord of cottonwood, assuming they are at the same stage of dryness, birch is the better buy.

Cooperative Extension has an excellent website with information on burning wood. It can be accessed at www.alaskawoodheating.com. There is a calculator to help you figure out your heating costs as well as lots of information on how to get the most from your wood. Be sure to check it out.

We also have several publications on using wood heat that are available on our website at www.uaf.edu/ces/pubs.

Burning wood can help you stretch your heating dollars, but only if you are making good choices with the firewood you burn.

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