In A Blaze Of Glory

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Louisiana winters have long been associated with a damp, penetrating type of cold. The perfect antidote is an old-fashioned log fire. The flames, blazing merrily and throwing dancing shadows across the room, warm everyone both psychologically and physically — when the fireplace works right, that is.

Owners of fireplaces which do not perform as they are supposed to, will swear the perverse things are possessed of devils with a mind of their own, sometimes burning beautifully, at other times resisting all efforts of their owners to produce anything faintly resembling the cheery hearth they are supposed to be.

A really cantankerous fireplace can try the patience of its owner like no other invention of man. Just what makes fireplaces behave that way?

The answer is, once again, one of design. Architectes over the centuries have, by trial and error, developed a set of empirical fireplace dimensions and shapes which work. Any fireplace not designed within these limits is more than likely not going to work either.

How Big?

The heart of proper fireplace design is based on the physical principle of heated air (and smoke) rising. If you provide a big enough hole in the top of your fireplace (the chimney) and get it above or away from errant wind currents outside the house, the fireplace has simply got to work every time. The big question then is: How big is big enough?

The place to start measuring is with the fireplace opening. A fireplace should be wide enough to accept the logs you are going to burn in it. Most logs are cut in two or two-and-a-half foot lengths. Adding six inches for lagginap, fireplaces two-and-a-half or three feet wide are adequate for most purposes.

Many clients ask for "really big" fireplaces, say four or five feet wide, which is all right if you are going to burn logs that big, but they won't work as well with the standard-size logs most of us buy.

Width Critical

The height of the fireplace is not so critical as the width, but too most fireplaces it should be between two feet four inches and two feet eight inches high. Two feet six inches works very well most of the time. A fireplace needs to be deep enough, front to back, to place the logs well toward the back, so that errant flames (and smoke) won't be inclined to lick up the front of your mantel.

Sixteen inches is about the minimum. Anything over two feet is wasted, eighteen inches being about right most of the time.

Having picked a size for the fireplace opening, the next step is to select a flue liner size. Made of terra cotta, flue liners are rectangular or circular pottery pipes around which the chimney is built. They are necessary to prevent the hot combustion gases from seeping out through cracks in the brick and setting your house on fire.

Pick a flue liner with a cross section area equal to one tenth of the area of the fireplace opening, then use the next larger size. A too-small flue liner is one of the two most causes of smoky fireplaces.

Locate Chimney

The other smoke cause is the chimney that is too low or located poorly. If your chimney is in the path of errant winds, blowing over a roof's ridge will actually blow down into the chimney, forcing the smoke to back up into the rooms below.

To avoid this condition, a chimney top should extend at least three feet (more, if you can) above the nearest roof ridge. Likewise a chimney that is placed near a group of tall trees or a hillside will be subject to backdrafts which cause smoking.

There are other fine points of fireplace design, but if you will observe these two, flue area and chimney height, you will have gone a long way toward building a fireplace which will burn properly.

Probably the easiest way to design a fireplace that will work properly is to use one of the patented cast-iron damper units on the market and dimension your fireplace exactly, to the inch as the manufacturer recommends. There are several on the market. Donley, Sutton, Superior, Peerless and Majestic are some of the better known manufacturers. And they are all good.