

To Burn or Not to Burn

Written by: Patrice Hampson, M.Ed.

Peterborough Fire & Rescue

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The onset of spring inspires a passionate eagerness to spruce up and beautify our outdoor surroundings. Some homeowners can keep it simple by planting an assortment of flowers and spreading out a little bark mulch, while others, including my family, are in the midst of a greater struggle. Laborious yard work, like the raking of leaves and the stacking of brush can take hours of people-power, and thankfully, at least at my house, is not limited to adult muscles only. Tree limbs and branches come in all sizes, but did you know that they cannot exceed 5 inches in diameter if you want to include them in your brush pile burns? What to burn or not to burn...that is this week's question.

And here is the answer. According to the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, only leaves, woody debris or brush less than 5 inches in diameter, and untreated wood and dimension lumber can be burned. Air quality regulations restrict the type of material burned in the open. Many New Hampshire citizens are not yet aware of a new state law that prohibits the residential burning of house-hold trash. The ban, effective January 1, 2003, forbids the burning of packaging materials, coated or laminated cardboard, furniture, oily rags, stumps, painted or treated lumber, tires, tubes, plastics, foam rubber, shingles and food waste. That's a fresh sigh of relief since collectively, the 6,000 backyard burn barrels used in NH are the state's third largest source of dioxin, one of the most toxic substances known. This new law will reduce the risk of cancer, birth defects and other health problems created by dioxin and other toxic substances released during backyard burning.

Now that you are informed of the restricted materials, it's time to figure out where you want to assemble your brush piles. When constructing, make certain the piles are at least 50 feet from the nearest structure or wooded area and away from power or telephone lines. Once they are built and on the day of your scheduled burn, enlist your children in collecting fire protection equipment right from your own garage including a ready hose, shovel or rake and several buckets of water. Ultimately, the greatest fire protection you can provide is that of constant surveillance, either by yourself or another responsible adult. It goes without saying, children should never be left alone to tend a burn.

What's next? On the day you plan on burning, rain or shine, **contact your local Fire Department or Forest Ranger to obtain a burn permit.** Be aware that there are restrictions on the hours of the day when a burn can occur. **NO BURNING from 9:00am to 5:00pm**, unless it's raining. Be prepared to answer the following questions: What are you going to burn? Are there any tires or tubes in the material to be burned? Where are you going to burn it? How are you planning on igniting the fire? What do you have for fire protection? How much help will you have during the burn? Do you own the land where you plan to burn? Will you be able to extinguish the fire? Do you have means

to call the fire department if the fire spreads beyond the brush pile? Are you at least 18 years of age?

A written permit from the fire department or local fire warden is essential for a few reasons. It alerts the proper authorities of when and where a burn will occur, eliminating the need for fire personnel to respond to every “woods fire” spotted by alert citizens. It also excuses the permit holder from a criminal offense in the event the fire rages out of control. However, the permittee needs to be aware that obtaining permission doesn’t exclude them from certain liabilities. The permit holder is responsible for any damage to property or injury to persons occasioned by the brush fire. One may also be held liable for costs incurred by the fire department, including personnel, equipment and apparatus necessary to extinguish an out-of-control fire.

It all sounds rather alarming, doesn’t it? It needn’t be. As I’ve explained to my tired, worn-out children, if you are well prepared and have taken the proper steps to insure a safe burn, everything should go smoothly. And before you know it, all the evidence of your hard labor will go up in smoke. Hmmm... I can’t think of another circumstance where this would be the desired, end result.

As always, feel free to call the Peterborough Fire & Rescue Association at 924-8090 if you have questions with regards to burn permits or other safety related topics.