

Patio Fireplaces in Cheltenham Township

Many questions are received at the Fire Marshal's Office about the use of outdoor fireplaces. Many call these Chimnea's but there are many types.

Outdoor fireplaces and barbecues have been around for many years. In the past they were more than likely large stone or brick structures that were built in place and couldn't be moved. A few years ago portable clay and metal patio fireplaces became increasingly available and quickly gained in popularity. Most call these fireplaces Chimnea's. A Chimnea is usually made of clay with a hearth opening and short flue. It has attached clay legs or sits on a separate metal stand. Chimnea's are but one type of portable fireplace. Below are some of the many questions that have been received regarding their use.

Can outdoor fireplaces be used in Cheltenham Township?

Currently yes. The fire prevention code allows their use. The fire area cannot be over three feet in diameter.

What can I burn in them?

You should only burn clean, dry wood. Most complaints come from excessive smoke being generated. This is usually due to green or non seasoned wood or other than wood being burned. Patio fireplaces are not intended to burn other than wood.

How far from the house does my patio fireplace have to be?

The easy answer is use common sense. Unfortunately many people think nothing is going to happen to them. Keep the fireplace away from combustible construction. Think at least 20 feet. In many instances this may not be far enough. Some fireplaces have no sides. A sudden gust or change in wind direction would cause smoke and possibly embers to fly.

Can I burn the brush I collect from my yard?

No. The township has a recycling program. This includes the recycling of yard waste such as brush and leaves. Burning yard waste is not permitted within the township. It is also not allowed by the Department of Environmental Protection since there is a recycling program in place. Burning yard waste by using it in a patio fireplace is just trying to circumvent the prohibition. Not only will this probably cause excessive smoke and problems with your neighbors, it is an offense that can lead to a citation and fine.

I burn only wood but my neighbor complained. The police came and told me to put the fire out. If I am allowed to use one how come they can make me put it out?

If the smoke is affecting your neighbor then the police can make you extinguish the fire. Not doing so can also result in a fine. A little more on this subject, (since this is a question that gets asked a lot!) Just because you like the smell of a wood burning fire does not mean your neighbor does. Or maybe the smoke is going in their windows. Some people have respiratory problems such as asthma that can be affected by your use of a patio fireplace. I also see more complaints when people use their patio fireplaces in rainy weather and on humid days when smoke just won't rise very well.

My neighbor has a patio fireplace. I don't mind it but sometimes they leave and it is still burning. Is this OK?

No. All fires must be constantly attended by a responsible person. Never leave 'just for a few minutes'. Not only is this a fire safety issue, (and a requirement of the fire prevention code), it is an attractive sight to children who may not understand what could happen if they got too close or touched the fireplace.

What else should I be aware of when using an outdoor fireplace?

Never let anyone try to start a fire with any flammable or combustible liquids. Make sure the fireplace is sturdy and on firm ground where it will not tip over. Think about what is around and above the fireplace... Will it burn? Always keep an extinguisher, hose or other means of extinguishing the fire nearby. Respect your neighbors. Don't create problems for them because of your use of the fireplace.

Need more information or have other questions?

Contact the Fire Marshal's Office at 215-887 1000 Ext. 235