

fire it up

There's nothing like a fireplace when it comes to feeling cosy, and there are plenty of options for fuel, efficiency and looks.

While it looks good, crackles pleasingly and feels cosy, the traditional open fireplace is on its way out due to new restrictions that relate to pollution concerns. Open fireplaces are notoriously inefficient anyway.

You can, however, now buy highly efficient 'clean-air approved' versions that comply with new regulations and produce up to five times the heat of the old-style fire with minimal energy wastage. And they still provide a cheering, classic ambiance. These wood fires have glass fronts and heat control devices, they're fuel efficient and safe, and although there are still ashes to contend with, clean-up is minimal.

Another reason for the popularity of modern wood fires is that wood, as we all know, is a carbon-neutral and sustainable form of fuel and a relatively cheap form of home heating – especially if you have access to your own supply. Strict rules apply around wood burners in terms of installation. Different councils have different regulations so it pays to check those out.

Wetback systems can be installed to harness the fire's energy, to heat water. This can be effective when the fire is in constant use but it does mean that less heat is put out by the fire. Heat transfer systems are also popular now but you need to be sure that your

fire is powerful enough to produce enough heat for this to work.

It's a gas

Flued gas heating is also popular. It's clean, can be very economical, and can be run off piped natural gas or gas cylinders. Cylinder supply companies can track your usage and refill your cylinders when necessary so you never run out.

Gas fireplaces come with or without a glass door and each option works differently. When gas fires are open fronted with a conventional flue, the same low efficiency problem occurs as it does with open wood fires. Balance flue fires are glass-fronted and draw oxygen from outside the house. Because no heat is lost they are particularly efficient and ideal for cooler areas. They have the added advantage that the flue does not need to go straight up so you can put them in more locations in your home, often simply fluing straight out the back through an external wall.

A gas fireplace can be included in a smart house plan or have its own mobile app and be turned on before you get home. **H**

words Louise Richardson

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get the look

In terms of the look of the fireplace, there's a lot of choice, from traditional squarer formats to long sleek models with pebble fire beds and individual flame jets.

Dramatic see-through units can be placed between two rooms. Long and low is popular, often with a marble or concrete hearth. With gas models, you can simply install them into the wall, skipping the hearth altogether. In small spaces such as an apartment this can make good sense.

The other big trend right now is 'frameless' fireplaces because this lets the interior designer or homeowner create a feature wall with their choice of wall coverings and colours that bring out the simple beauty of the fire itself.

Some homeowners like to position a television above the fireplace, which is possible with some gas, ethanol and electric fires, and in a limited way with wood fires. You can create an entire feature wall that includes the television, storage and sound system and the fireplace.

There is also a trend to separate the television and fireplace experience, and create a media-free spot for family conversation around the fireplace.

Most fireplaces come with a choice of fire beds, like logs or pebbles, and a choice of fascia surrounds to suit your particular decor, for example plain black or chrome.

If you want a traditional surround, demolition yards and online auctions are definitely the places to look. If you can't find a genuine antique, there are a number of companies offering very realistic copies, complete with period-style tiles.

And if you just love the look of a fireplace but don't actually need it as a means of heating – if your house has a heat-pump for example – there are attractive fireplace units that have the glow of the genuine article, usually with a very low-level electric heater. Some can produce up to 2kW of heat which might be sufficient in a smallish space.

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