



Kathleen Allasia's rustic woodburning firepit made of Wilkinson stone in a gravel seating area

## EXTENDING THE SEASONS WITH A FIREPIT

# Stay Outside Longer...

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLLEEN MIKO

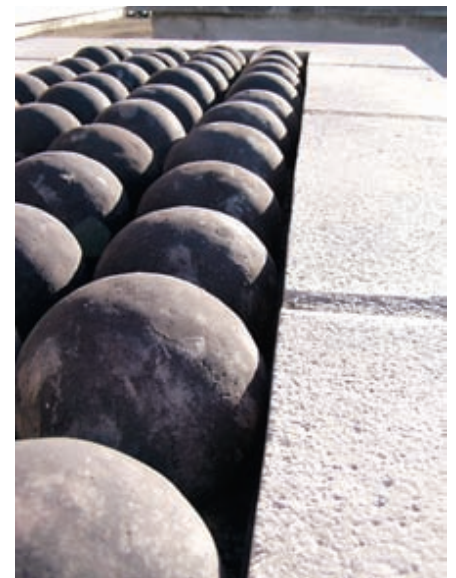
There's a reason firepits have become increasingly popular: With more and more people wanting to spend time outdoors, it's natural to do so around a warm and inviting fire. In our mild climate, a firepit is a wonderful garden addition that can be used year-round. After all, even in the middle of summer, we're blessed with cool evenings. But especially in fall when we have trouble saying goodbye to our summer habits, a firepit will extend a barbecue into the evening.

A firepit is a gathering spot where we can relax and talk, enjoy a drink or a meal; for kids, the ultimate experience — making s'mores! No one will deny that the enchanting dance of a fire is the perfect accompaniment to storytelling and music.

### Safety First

When planning a firepit, the most important consideration is location. I look for a spot that is easy to reach from other areas used for entertaining, such as the kitchen, patios and decks, but a safe distance from structures, including fences. If the deck or patio is large enough, including the firepit in that space is ideal — that way, lounging around the firepit can be done concurrently with other outdoor activities.

For small patios, locate the firepit in another nearby garden space with a well-lit and, ideally, flat path reaching it. While it may be obvious, it bears noting that firepits are most commonly used at dusk or in the dark. With that consideration in mind, low-voltage lighting placed to



Close up of "fireballs" and masonry cap in propane firepit at the Paule Beachfront Villa



Author's propane firepit with slate flagstone facade and the cap with glass gems and colored stones embedded in the mortar joints



Propane firepit designed by Colleen Miko and built of Goldrush ledgestone with flagstone cap

shine down and light the path, but not to glare into the eyes, is a must. When at the fire, we want to be able to gaze up and enjoy the stars, not look up into a flood light.

#### Fuel Your Dreams

Once you have chosen a location, decide on how you will fuel your firepit. Your choices are wood burning or propane. Keep in mind that if you choose a wood-burning firepit, it is illegal to burn

building materials, painted or treated wood, paper, cardboard or any type of trash. You can use firewood, charcoal or manufactured fire logs.

I recommend propane because it's the safest, easiest and cleanest. With propane, you never have to worry about smoke in your eyes or your lungs (read: air pollution!) and thus your hair and clothes smelling like a campfire. With propane, you won't concern yourself with

errant ash and sparks or taking the time to thoroughly extinguish smoldering coals. When you're dozing off after your cocoa, you simply turn a key and it's off.

Propane firepits do cost more in terms of construction and operation. If you use propane to fuel your home stove and water heater, using propane for a firepit is a natural because it is already onsite. For those with natural gas or electricity only, a firepit would require a small portable ►

propane tank, but chances are you already have one of these for your barbeque.

If a wood-burning firepit is best for your situation, there are some safety precautions to keep in mind. One is to make sure there is no dry grass or brush near the firepit. If it is located in a lawn, make sure to irrigate to keep fire danger low and always, regardless of location, keep a hose or large bucket of water nearby; never leave a burning firepit unattended. Limiting the inside diameter of the firepit at 3 feet across will keep you in line with state law that says recreational fires cannot exceed 3 feet across or 2 feet in height; not to mention that fires any larger are too hot and put out too much smoke to sit around comfortably.

### Matters of Style

Once you have decided the location and type, the fun part starts, and that's selecting the style. You are only limited by your imagination when it comes to what materials you can use to construct your firepit. There are so many lovely types of stone, brick and masonry block available that you'll never be at a loss to find the perfect material, regardless of whether you prefer a more rustic or refined look.

When designing a firepit for a client's yard, I look at factors such as what other materials are used in the garden for paths, walls and patios and in what shapes. When a firepit matches other hardscaping, there is a sense of unity to the garden. While not necessarily needing to be made of the same materials, the colors should at least be compatible. For instance, a concrete patio is nicely complemented by a firepit made of gray stone. If the path leading to the firepit is flagstone, a concrete firepit with a dressier flagstone cap is a pleasing option.

I usually design round firepits because I think they are more practical in that they allow more seating around them and best access to the warmth of the fire. The same holds true of an octagon or a rectangle. Square or rectangular firepits are particularly appropriate for homes with very contemporary architecture and gardens.

Leta and Libby McDonald are enjoying s'mores.



A contemporary-style firepit at the Pauole Beachfront Villa in Longbranch, designed by Father Nature Landscapes



### How Low Can You Go?

Another consideration is how high to make the outside edge of the firepit. Much of this will depend on what kind of seating you intend to use around the pit; when the seating and the firepit height complement each other, the warmth of the fire is best appreciated. Adirondack or beach chairs, with a seat low to the ground, require a lower pit, perhaps one that is sunken. Patio chairs or standard benches with an average seat height of 18 inches are best gathered around a firepit with at least 12 inches of height.

I like to have the edge of the firepit at a comfortable height to rest my feet (this also requires a nice wide rim of 5 inches or more so that your shoes don't get hot). Another consideration is that raised firepits have a little something to stop you if you stumble in the dark around them, whereas sunken firepits do not. A raised firepit may be a better style for families with young children and for frequent cocktail parties.

For firepits on or alongside decks, built-in benches are common and practical. Since such seating is more or less permanent and immobile, make sure it's designed properly for comfort and practicality. Keeping the height of the seat, the depth of the seat and the angle of the back comfortable is very important. For the average frame, a seat that is 18 inches off the ground, 20 inches deep, and has a 20-inch-tall back at a 100-degree angle to the seat is common. For permanent seating around a firepit, take care to allow enough room to safely maneuver between the people seated there and the firepit itself but not so much room that you can't prop your feet on the side or feel the heat of the fire.

Appearance-wise, the most rustic firepit is one that is wood-burning and sunken. However, propane users take heart: A burner that consists of concentric rings puts out a very natural-looking flame and great heat distribution. I've seen some pretty creative uses of recycled materials

for firepits over the years, such as an old clothes dryer drum, but remember that burn barrels are illegal in Washington.

#### Drainage

Whatever style firepit you desire, make sure you allow for drainage when you build it, whether wood-burning or propane. If you don't, at best your firepit will be an unusable pond in the rainy season and at worst your propane pipes will rust and clog. I recommend using a cover over propane firepits in the winter to extend the life of plumbing and keep out debris. Lid options include plywood, metal trash can lids or snow discs; or you can have one custom-made, as I did at a local sheet metal shop in stainless for around \$100. ♦

A Woodburning firepit in masonry block with mortared brick facade set in stamped concrete patio



## THE STATE LAW REGARDING RECREATIONAL FIRES:



According to state fire code, recreational fires include cooking fires, charcoal barbecues, campfires and bonfires on private property and do not require a burn permit. Depending on your fire jurisdiction, this may include fires lit in chimineas, fire pits, fire bowls and similar free-standing appliances commonly sold at home-improvement stores and mass retailers. They are allowed in both urbanized and unincorporated areas, though the following regulations apply:

- **Mind the ban.** Recreational fires are always prohibited during air-quality burn bans. They are also prohibited during a fire-safety burn ban of Phase II or greater (check with your local fire district.)
- **Be a good neighbor.** It is always illegal to smoke out your neighbor. If smoke from your fire bothers your neighbors, damages their property or otherwise causes a nuisance, you must immediately put it out.
- **Allow a 25-foot Building Setback** for recreational fires and check the manufacturers recommendations for freestanding appliances.

For more information on burn bans, call: 800.323-BURN or for Kitsap County 360.871-2425.