

Chimineas and Fire Pits

Introduction

Many people enjoy entertaining outdoors. When the temperature drops, they often create additional heat with an outdoor recreational fire in a chiminea or fire pit.

The popularity of these devices has soared in the last several years and they are available at most retail chain stores, garden centers and hearth stores.

However, residents in multi-residential housing must take special precautions to enjoy the benefits of recreational burning. Recreational fires on or beneath balconies are unsafe and, in many cases, prohibited by local fire ordinances.

By taking a few simple precautions suggested in this guide, you could prevent a relaxing evening outdoors from turning into a fiery tragedy for you and your community.



What CAU Recommends:

- > Prohibit chimineas and fire pits on or beneath decks and balconies
- > Never use a chiminea or fire pit indoors, in an enclosed porch, gazebo or similar enclosed space
- > Never leave a recreational fire unattended
- > Do not use combustible or flammable liquids to ignite fires
- > Do not overload the burn chamber with wood
- > Read and follow the manufacturer's instructions for set up, use and maintenance of the appliance
- > Burn only seasoned firewood
- > Make sure ashes are completely extinguished and dispose of them outdoors in a noncombustible container

Need More Information?

Associations may request additional information on this topic by contacting CAU's Loss Control Department. The Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association (www.hpba.org) has a variety of consumer information available.

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What are the Hazards?

In multi-residential housing, the risk of fire to one homeowner is a risk to all homeowners sharing the same and nearby buildings. Failure to take adequate precautions to prevent the spread of fire can result in injury or death to fellow residents, and a large lawsuit against you.

Outdoor recreational fires located too close to a building, such as on or beneath a balcony, can easily get out of control and spread to living areas.

The smoke produced by an outdoor recreational fire can be harmful, even fatal, and you cannot control the direction that wind will blow the smoke. Lethal smoke can build up inside your unit or your neighbor's unit without you ever knowing it.

The improper disposal of ashes can cause an unwanted fire. Even ashes that are two to three days old can retain enough heat to start a fire if they are placed with other combustibles.

These are the predominant reasons why, for multi-residential housing, most fire codes and local ordinances prohibit outdoor recreational fires on decks, balconies, beneath combustible overhangs or within 15 to 25 feet of the building.

Burning Guidelines

Before an association allows its residents to light outdoor recreational fires it needs to check two things. First, verify that the local fire marshal and municipality permits recreational burning and, if so, do they require any permits or place any other restrictions on burning. Second, verify that the association documents permit outdoor recreational burning as many prohibit this activity.

When the association allows residents to light recreational fires in a community, the board should establish specific rules and regulations to control this activity and minimize the potential for a fire to spread to a building. At a minimum, the board should specify where burning can occur, what residents can burn and require that a means to extinguish a fire is nearby.

Most manufacturers do not recommend using a chiminea or fire pit on or beneath balconies and decks. Recreational fires in these appliances should be at least 15 feet from a building and for open fires in a fire pit, at least 25 feet from a building. Chimeas and fire pits should also be located such that the predominant wind patterns carry smoke away from the building.

When residents use a chiminea or fire pit on a deck, the association should require the resident to install a noncombustible protective insulating material such as patio blocks or a hearth pad beneath the device.

The association should also limit residents to burning seasoned firewood or other clean burning fuel and require residents to install a spark arrestor. Residents should not burn trash, rubbish or yard waste.

As with any product that involves fire, there is a chance that things can get out of control. Anyone lighting a fire in a chiminea or fire pit should have a means of extinguishing the fire near the device. Sand, dirt or a portable dry chemical fire extinguisher are effective ways to extinguish a fire in a chiminea or fire pit. Never use water or a CO2 extinguisher to put out a fire in a chiminea because the rapid cooling and steam can crack the clay and damage the appliance.

Residents should allow sufficient time for ashes to cool then dispose of them in a metal container with a tight fitting lid. Keep this container at least 15 feet from combustibles. Never put ashes, cinders or smoldering coals in a paper bag, cardboard box or other combustible object.

Conclusion

Whether or not local fire codes, ordinances, or the association's documents restrict recreational burning on balconies and near combustible building components in multi-residential housing, it is a good idea for the association to do so. The association should adopt a rule that prohibits recreational burning on or beneath elevated decks, balconies and roof decks. The rule should also restrict the use of these appliances to grade level at least 15 feet from the building and open fires to at least 25 feet from the building.