



Alfresco entertaining has led to the increased popularity of firepits and patio heaters

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THE HEAT IS ON

A convivial alfresco gathering of family and friends is something we’ve grown to enjoy, and as a result outdoor heating is on the rise. But with the climate crisis, is burning yet more fossil fuel a luxury we can afford? Here, we look at the alternatives

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People have gathered by the fireside to cook food, tell stories and strengthen community bonds ever since early cave dwellers first struck a spark and discovered fire. We may not be dependent on open fires for heating and cooking these days but, thanks to socially distanced gatherings, we’ve been doing a lot more socialising outdoors – and sales of patio heaters have grown accordingly.

Enjoying alfresco socialising in good company, with a heater or wood burner to provide warmth as the evening air starts to chill, is a lovely thing to do. But many would argue that given the current climate-change crisis it’s completely counter-intuitive to use certain heaters outdoors. According to the UK government’s 2019 Clean Air Strategy,





Garden Trading Sarsden chimenea with raised feet, £240; gardentrading.co.uk



Wakehurst rustic steel outdoor fireplace, £399.99; gardenesque.com



Umbra outdoor electric steel heater, £419.99; gardenesque.com

burning solid fuels in our homes produces 38 per cent of the country's annual particulate emissions, and it's important not to contribute further to these emissions, especially in built-up urban areas where air pollution levels may already be high. The UK has some designated 'smoke-control areas' in cities including London, where only some types of fuel can be burned indoors. And although outdoor appliances such as barbecues, chimeneas, firepits and pizza ovens are currently still allowed under these restrictions, if you live in a smoke-control area and want to use outdoor heating you still have to burn authorised fuel – or risk a £1,000 fine.

FOSSIL FUELLED

So what about gas and electric patio heaters? They have become increasingly popular because people like the fact they are 'clean' – with no mess or lingering smoke. But they are far from 'clean' in environmental terms. The Energy Saving Trust has found that 22 per cent of the UK's carbon emissions come from our homes, mostly from the energy we use for heating, hot water and to run appliances; adding patio heaters into the mix only increases these emissions.

greener barbecues

- Barbecues are often the centrepiece of an outdoor gathering. As with patio heaters, it's best to ditch the gas – and definitely the disposable barbecues in a foil tray – and go for wood or charcoal.
- A lot of products made for barbecues are not only imported but also come from unsustainable sources and may be coated in toxic flammable chemicals. For a more eco option, look for UK-made sustainable charcoal. Check for a 'Grown in Britain' symbol or FSC logo.
- A briquette maker, which compacts old paper into logs for burning, is a good investment if you love to get the grill out regularly; you can pick one up for around £15-20.

'Ultimately, both gas and electric heaters are burning fossil fuels, which causes greenhouse gas emissions,' says Angela Terry, founder of One Home, an initiative to provide positive lifestyle solutions to help combat global warming. 'At a time when eco campaigners are working hard to get people to reduce energy loss from their homes by turning down the thermostat or installing insulation, for example, using a fossil-fuel-based heater in the garden, essentially to pump more heat into outer space, doesn't seem sensible.'

If you really want an outdoor heater, then electricity is a slightly better option than gas. Only 1 per cent of gas currently comes from renewable sources, plus it's usually imported. Although electricity is produced from fossil fuels, the industry is gradually being cleaned up by increasing the amount of power that comes from sustainable sources such as wind farms and solar panels. Also, while gas heaters tend to send most of the heat straight up into space, an infrared electric heater is more directional, so the heat goes towards your guests and less is wasted. Look for a short-wave infrared heater over medium-wave for the highest energy efficiency. These heaters are also safe to use under cover – in a gazebo, for example – which further helps to conserve energy by keeping it inside. Still, it's important to remember that outdoor electric heating is still 'extra' and, as Angela says, 'our priority should be to conserve energy as much as possible, regardless of where it comes from'.

Another option is biofuels, which are presented as an eco-friendly alternative. Bioethanol is produced from food crops such as corn, wheat, sugar cane and sugar beet. But while they have lower carbon emissions, their environmental impact can actually be worse than those from fossil fuels, as their production uses a lot of natural resources (land and water, in particular). Before being tempted to buy any biofuel, ensure you understand how it is produced and if it is truly sustainable.



Antique kadai fire bowl, £650;
scaramangashop.co.uk



OPEN FIRES

A firepit or chimenea can be a more eco-friendly choice. They can't be used under cover or on a combustible surface, but what they may lack in heat-generating abilities on a cool day, they make up for in charm and creating atmosphere.

Former sustainability consultant Taylor Gathercole has been inspired by our primal love of fire and recently founded Norfolk-based company Kindwood, an ethical fireside-living brand whose mission is to enhance this experience while being kind to the planet.

'The burning of wood fuel can be highly sustainable as long as the wood is sourced correctly, and in order for woodlands to be managed properly, it is important to thin them out,' says Taylor. 'In terms of carbon absorption, there is a significant difference between a tree that has space to grow with plenty of light, compared to a tree crowded by others. A tree with optimum space and light could reach full size in 25 years, whereas it could take a tree with less space 100 years to reach the same size. Both would absorb the same amount of carbon, but the tree that was able to grow more quickly would do so much sooner than the crowded tree. This means that judicious harvesting of small numbers of trees to thin out woodland will ensure they can help to reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. Those cut from thinned woodland are not suitable to be used for furniture or construction, so this waste product can be used as fuel.'

And if you do choose a wood-burning heater it's important to consider the provenance of the fuel you buy, and whether it has been sustainably sourced. 'Many of the wood fuels sold in the UK are imported, which obviously comes with higher carbon emissions from transportation and doesn't guarantee quality or sustainable practices,' says Taylor. 'We should ideally opt for locally sourced, high-quality kindling and logs, and use natural firelighters rather than toxic accelerators.'

Angela agrees: 'If you use a firepit or chimenea, always aim to burn a locally produced wood fuel or briquettes made from waste materials such as sawdust, as this is generally considered to be a carbon-neutral fuel as the wood has absorbed carbon from the atmosphere.'

One important thing to note about wood fuel is that it must be absolutely dry for the hottest, cleanest burn – it takes at

Heatsail freestanding electric
patio heater lamp, £3,495;
cuckooland.com



least a year for wood to fully dry out or be properly 'seasoned' after cutting. Achieving a hot, dry wood fire is key because any kind of solid fuel releases fine particulate matter (PM2.5) into the atmosphere, which pollutes the air and can cause health issues. Wood that's more than 20 per cent moisture will release much more black smoke and particulates than properly seasoned or kiln-dried wood.

Whichever outdoor heating option you choose, use it carefully. 'Having a firepit for an occasional party or special occasion is of course fine, but if you buy a gas or electric heater the chances are you are going to use it regularly, and you have to decide if that's really in anyone's best interests, given the current climate crisis,' cautions Angela.

As so many of us have been seduced by outdoor entertaining, perhaps consider other – and longer-term – options. Give your shed a stylish makeover or put up a gazebo with sides that can be rolled down when it gets chilly. 'I tend to keep in mind the old adage that there's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothing,' says Angela. 'So if you want to sit outside in unsociable weather, just pop a thick jumper on, pour everyone a hot chocolate (Fairtrade, of course!) and hand out hot-water bottles. If it's really nippy, take your cue from the Queen and give everyone a cosy blanket.' Add good conversation and a sprinkling of stars, and that primal outdoor experience we love is complete. 🌟

find out more

- Check gov.uk/smoke-control-area-rules for information on smoke-controlled areas, and also see your local council website. All authorities have different rules.
- For more advice on saving energy and reducing carbon emissions, visit energysavingtrust.org.uk.
- Visit One Home (onehome.org.uk) for a list of genuine green energy suppliers (that haven't been 'greenwashed'), to support the growth of sustainable energy.
- Kindwood supply sustainably sourced kiln-dried logs, kindling, firelighters and charcoal (kindwood.co.uk).



Sustainably produced logs and
firelighters from Kindwood;
kindwood.co.uk