

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BONFIRES?

Air Pollution



Burning garden waste produces smoke, especially if it is damp and smouldering. This will contain pollutants including carbon monoxide, dioxins and particles. Burning plastic, rubber or painted materials not only creates an unpleasant smell, but also produces a range of poisonous compounds. Your bonfire will also add to the general background level of air pollution. Air pollution in the UK often reaches unhealthy levels – do you really want to make it worse?

Health Effects

Emissions from bonfires can have damaging health effects. Serious harm is unlikely if exposure to bonfire smoke is brief. However, problems may be caused for asthmatics, bronchitis sufferers, people with heart conditions and children.

Annoyance

The smoke, smuts and smell from bonfires are the subject of many complaints to local authorities. Smoke prevents your neighbours from enjoying their gardens, opening windows or hanging washing out, and reduces visibility in the neighbourhood and on roads.

Safety

Fires can spread to fences or buildings and scorch trees and plants. Exploding bottles and cans are a hazard when rubbish is burned. Piles of garden waste are often used as a refuge by animals, so look out for hibernating wildlife and sleeping pets. Never leave your fire unattended.

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE ?

Composting

Rather than burning garden waste or putting food waste in the dustbin where it will end up buried or incinerated, a compost bin will produce a useful soil conditioner, saving money on commercial products. Woody waste can be shredded to make it suitable for composting or mulching. You can buy or hire shredders and some allotment societies have their own. If using a shredder, then be considerate – they can be very noisy. Take care not to replace one nuisance with another.

Recycling

Household waste should certainly not be burned on a bonfire. Many items can be recycled; find out about recycling facilities from your local council offices. Garden

waste should not be mixed with household waste. The refuse collectors may not take your refuse if it contains garden waste. They will not take furniture, carpet or builder's rubble. Waste can be taken to the local amenity site if you have your own transport or you can purchase special bags from the council which will be taken by the normal refuse collection. There are local contractors who will take rubbish to the tip for a reasonable charge. Old beds, mattresses and sofas should never be burned. There are local charity groups who will collect, refurbish and recycle old furniture for re-use in the community.

Bonfires and the Law

It is a common misconception that there are specific byelaws to prohibit bonfires – there aren't. An outright ban would be difficult to enforce and very occasionally a bonfire is the best practicable way to dispose of garden waste. If used sensitively, the occasional bonfire should not cause a major problem. However, where a neighbour is causing a problem by burning rubbish, the law is on your side.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ACT (EPA) 1990

Under this act, a statutory nuisance includes "smoke, fumes or gasses emitted from premises so as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance". In practice, to be considered a statutory nuisance, a bonfire would have to be a persistent problem, interfering substantially with your well being, comfort or enjoyment of your property.

If bothered by smoke, approach your neighbour and explain the problem. You might feel awkward, but they may not be aware of the distress they are causing and it will hopefully make them more considerate in the future. If this fails, contact the Environmental Health Department (tel. 823000) . They must investigate your complaint and can issue a nuisance abatement notice under the EPA. The Act also allows you to take private action in the magistrate's court. If your neighbour's fire is only occasional it is unlikely to be considered a nuisance in law. Similarly, if you are being troubled by bonfires from different neighbours, each only burning occasionally, a nuisance action would be difficult as there are several offenders. In this situation encourage them to consider the alternatives – give them a copy of this leaflet!

HIGHWAYS ACT 1980

Finally, under the Highways Act 1980, anyone lighting a fire and allowing smoke to drift across a road faces a fine if it endangers traffic. In this case it is the Police you need to contact as they enforce this Act and not the Local Council.

BARBEQUES

Barbeques can also cause a smoke problem – especially if you use lighter fuel. If the weather is still and sunny, a barbeque will contribute to photochemical smog (this is formed in the summer, by the action of sunlight on pollutants). Again, be considerate. If you are having a barbeque – tell your neighbours. Don't ignite it when they have hung their washing out, and if it is windy check that smoke won't blow straight into neighbouring properties.

BUT I LIKE 

A bonfire can be a convenient way of getting rid of a large amount of waste, or perhaps you want a bonfire just for fun, on Guy Fawkes night for instance. If a bonfire is the most practicable and environmentally friendly way to dispose of dry garden waste (for example, diseased plant material that cannot be composted) warn your neighbours – they are much less likely to complain. Remember that bonfire and barbeque parties can cause noise nuisance as well as smoke.

Bonfire Guidelines

If a bonfire is the best practicable option for disposing of garden waste, follow these guidelines and the chances are you won't annoy your neighbours or cause a serious nuisance.

- ◆ Only burn dry material.
- ◆ Never burn household rubbish, rubber tyres or anything containing plastic, foam or paint.
- ◆ Never use old engine oil, meths or petrol to light the fire or encourage it.
- ◆ Avoid lighting a fire in unsuitable weather conditions – smoke hangs in the air on damp, still days and in the evening. If it is windy, smoke may be blown into neighbour's gardens and across roads.
- ◆ Avoid burning at weekends and on bank holidays when people want to enjoy their gardens.
- ◆ Avoid burning when air pollution in your area is high or very high. This information is given in weather forecasts or you can check by ringing 0800 556677.
- ◆ Never leave a fire unattended or leave it to smoulder – douse it with water if necessary.

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Office Hours are 8:30 am to 5:00 pm from Monday to Thursday
Friday 8:30 am to 4:30 pm