

Fireplace & Ash Disposal Safety

Every year, fire departments respond to numerous fires caused by improper disposal of ash and coals from firepits, fireplaces, wood stoves, pellet stoves, and grills.

Even when they're not giving off any smoke or radiating perceptible heat, ashes can harbor hot coals for a long time after the fire goes out. This is because ash acts as an insulator, and coals buried in ash can stay hot for an extended period of time without burning themselves out. These coals can be hot enough to ignite any nearby flammable materials, and even melt through plastics well after you think the heat is extinguished. The exact amount of time it takes for coals to completely cool depends on many factors, such as how hot the fire was, what material was being burned, how much unburned fuel remained, how well insulated they were by the ashes around them, etc.

To be safe, treat all ashes as hot, even when you think they've had time enough to cool.

How to safely dispose of ashes:

- If possible, allow ashes to cool for several days in the fireplace, wood stove, grill, or firepit where you had the fire. These devices are designed to safely contain heat and flames. Recommended cooling time in the burn location is at least four days. Even if you think the fireplace or stove is completely cooled, wear fire resistant gloves when handling it and the ashes.
- When it's time to remove the ashes, transfer them to a metal or earthenware container with an air-tight, non-flammable lid.
- Once the ashes are in the container, put the lid on securely and set it outside your home on a non-combustible surface at least ten feet away from any combustibles until all ashes inside have fully cooled (wait at least a week). You're keeping the ash can away from combustibles because any heat in the ashes can transfer itself to the metal container and from there to nearby combustible surfaces — too many fires are started via hot ash cans touching flammable surfaces.
- When you believe the ashes are fully cooled, stir them to verify that they're cool all the way through, making sure there's no hot ash still remaining, insulated in the middle of the container. Check for heat by placing the back of your hand near the ashes all around the surface of the bucket, then stir and do it again repeatedly until you've fully checked the heat level of all the bucket contents. Do not put your bare hand directly into the ashes, as if there are still hot spots, you risk burning yourself.
- If you need to dispose of ashes without waiting a full week, you can speed up the cooling process by adding water to the container and stirring it into the ashes until no dry pockets remain. Put the lid back on and allow the contents to cool for several days, then do the above check for heat to verify the ashes have fully cooled.
- Keep the lid on the container at all times except when you're doing your heat check on the ashes — by doing so, you're both starving any coals of oxygen and

making sure there's no opportunity for the wind to whip heat into flames or spread hot ashes to nearby flammable materials.

- Do not place any combustible materials in the metal container with the ashes.
- Do not use a combustible container for storing ash (wood, plastic, and cardboard are all very bad ideas).
- Do not put your ash container on or near anything that is capable of catching fire.
- Do not use a regular vacuum cleaner or shop vac to clean out your wood or pellet stove (unless you haven't burned in it for weeks). Only fire resistant vacuum cleaners designed for that purpose can be used safely.
- Once the ashes have completely cooled (again, a week is the minimum recommended cooling time) and you've verified there are no hot spots left in the container, you can bag them and take them to the Larimer County landfill or the transfer station near Red Feather. Ashes cannot be disposed of in the association trash compactor (there were too many incidents when hot ashes were put in it in the past, starting dangerous fires, so disposing of ash there is now forbidden).

More Fireplace Safety Tips

- Have your chimney and fireplace or stove inspected and cleaned annually to ensure they're clear of obstructions and creosote. If any damage is found, do not use your fireplace or wood stove again until you've had it repaired. Never use an accelerant (gas, fire gel, etc) to start a fire in a fireplace or wood stove.
- Do not burn anything in your fireplace or wood stove that isn't firewood or kindling — even things that seem safe, like paper or cardboard may create large firebrands that can start a fire in the chimney.
- Ensure the fire is completely out (or safely banked if in a wood stove) before going to bed or leaving the house. Never leave any open fire (ie – any fire not in a wood or pellet stove) unattended for any reason.
- Make sure the area around the fireplace is clear of all combustibles (maintaining a clear three-foot radius is a good rule).
- Keep all children and pets a safe distance from fireplaces and wood stoves.
- Install both smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and change the batteries regularly. Changing batteries at Daylight Savings Time is recommended, as changing the clocks acts as a good reminder. Be aware also that both smoke and carbon monoxide detectors have a lifespan (typically around ten years) and must be replaced when they've passed their expiration date, as they can no longer be relied upon to work properly.
- Keep a fire extinguisher in the same room as any burning appliance and regularly check that it's still good (they can fail to work properly if used past their expiration date).
- Observe all the same safety precautions when using grills and firepits.