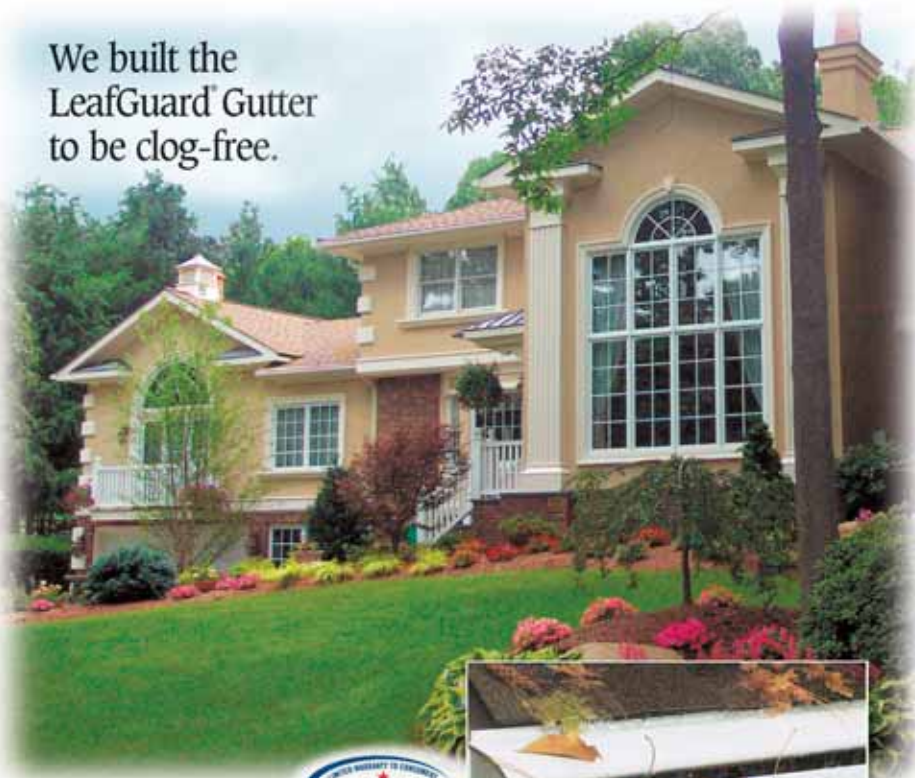


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# INTERIOR DESIGN

## Shopping the Hearth Way



For over 20 years, Nevada City resident Jake Covert built custom homes. In his own home he built a wood-burning fireplace. When he and his wife decided to convert their wood-burning fireplace to a gas-fired insert, they visited their local hearth retailer, Sierra Timberline, expecting to leave with their new insert. But, what they left with was something completely different.

“What we thought we were looking for wasn’t what we needed,” said Covert. Once there, storeowner Emily Potter guided the Coverts as they selected a more appropriate fireplace. “When we walked into the store and saw this realistic-looking gas fireplace, and discussed our options with Emily, we realized we could completely redo ours and have a really wonderful hearth if we didn’t limit ourselves to the existing unit.”

According to Potter, the Covert’s experience is not unusual for consumers searching for a fireplace or stove, even those with a construction background. Because of that, retailers have become part consumer educator and part detective in order to guide their customers to the product that will meet their needs.

“The process needs to be fun,” said Potter of the many questions she asks her customers before showing them a product. “It’s not like going out and looking for a washer and dryer. It’s going to be a lovely piece of furniture in their home. They need to be comfortable with the look and the function.”

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Many retailers now have websites where customers can educate themselves before they begin visiting stores. Searching these websites shoppers will find a measurement form that asks the important questions retailers need to know. "We're ahead of the game if the customer comes in with it filled-in, and further along yet if they bring in a floor plan and photograph too," said Judy Miller, co-owner with Margaret Laurensen, of Woodburners Two in Falls Church, VA.

Mitchell Heller, owner of Custom Fireside Shops in Sacramento, recently debuted a form dubbed the Fireplace Finder on his store's website that already has product brochures, specifications and manuals. "It's going to allow them to narrow down their favorite product from 200 to five or 10," he said.

With hundreds of products to choose from, consumers can become overwhelmed. Fuel source, heating capacity, usage, and design are some of the options that consumers must consider before purchasing a fireplace or stove. And, retailers will help them sift through products to find the one that best meets their needs.

"I assume the customer may be unclear on the source of heat," said Tom Just, owner

of Mountain Home Center in Truckee. "It's hard to sell people a product if they don't know which fuel they're leaning towards. If they are on the fence, we have a discussion on lifestyle issues."

According to the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association (HPBA) almost 70% of all hearth products burn gas which is easy, safe, clean-burning and efficient. All gas stoves, fireplaces, inserts and logs can burn either natural gas or propane (LP). They can be vented through the chimney, direct-vented through the wall or vent-free.

While not maintenance-free, wood, wood pellets and corn are also used to heat homes. Wood is the traditional fuel, one of few renewable sources of energy, typically comes from harvesting dead trees and, unlike fossil fuels, leaves no net carbon contribution behind. Wood pellets, also a renewable energy made from compressed sawdust, are clean-burning and packaged in forty-pound bags and are simple to use. Corn, one of the least expensive fuels, is also renewable and can be purchased from feed and seed stores or from farmers. Once the consumer has decided on a fuel source, retailers will ask what job the fireplace or stove is expected to perform.

"In the past homeowners had one fireplace," explains Heller, "But now fireplaces are often found in master bedrooms, family rooms, formal living rooms, even the kitchen or master bathroom."

"We ask them what the square footage is in the area they want to cover and the height of their ceiling," said Heller. "I don't want to give people any unreasonable expectations that a stove or fireplace in

one room is going to heat the entire house to a uniform temperature," added Heller. "Because in most cases it won't."

Don't forget to consider what's above the fireplace. "You'd be surprised at how many people want a freestanding stove and they want to place it under a bathroom," said Rod Poplerchick, owner of Climate Control, Yosemite, adding, "Can't put a stove there."

And this is exactly why, once a customer selects their fireplace or stove, retailers will do an on-site check. "We always go out to measure and to make sure the stove and all of the parts fit," added Poplerchick.

Installation can be complicated and any reputable retailer will make a site visit before finalizing the sale. Once the inspection is complete and the purchase made, the retailer will arrange for the installation.

"We install everything we sell," said Heller of Custom Fireside Shops. "Our installers are certified by the National Fireplace Institute. What it tells the consumer is that we not only understand the regulations but the standards required for being safe."



ARTICLE PROVIDED COURTESY OF MOUNTAIN HOME CENTER IN TRUCKEE, DAVCO SENSATIONS IN AUBURN AND SIERRA TIMBERLINE IN NEVADA CITY. VISIT THESE RETAILERS FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FIREPLACES, STOVES, INSERTS AND OTHER HEARTH PRODUCTS, OR VISIT WWW.HPBA.ORG. ARTICLE BY DEIDRA DARSA FOR NPBA.

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