

Wood Piles



* What is a wood pile? * Why have one? * What do you have to do to get one? *

A wood pile is exactly that - a pile of wood! It is used to keep your fire going for the length of time you need it, by having a supply ready on hand to add to the fire when needed rather than having to go and get, then chop more wood whilst the fire slowly goes out.

Depending on the type of campsite, there are two ways of collecting wood:

On most permanent Scout camp sites there is usually a wood pile of pallets and off-cuts from timber yards etc, which you will need to take back to your site and chop up.

If you are on a non-permanent site, it will probably be dry dead wood found lying on the ground, which you will have to scavenge for. The way to tell dead wood is that it will snap when you bend it - if it does not snap easily it is probably not dead ('green') and will also not burn as well. Remember the longer your camp and the more wood you burn, the further afield you will need to travel to find available wood - so don't waste it!. The pile should not be allowed to diminish too small if you have to carry wood from a great distance (see "Campsite Planning"). Sometimes if dead wood is not available on the ground it may be possible to pull a dead branch or even a tree down. Make sure you have the landowners' permission first and remember SAFETY first. Do not pull the tree on top of you.

Either way, whilst collecting your wood take care - do not try to carry too much; remember that two can carry more between them than they can alone. Remember to care for the environment - do not drag a log out of a hedge if it means destroying the hedge. Some people enjoy collecting wood but not everyone, so try not to keep sending the smallest person as they will soon become disenchanted with camping. It really is a case of 'many hands make light work'.

Before you begin, choose the site of your wood pile (see "Campsite Planning"). This should be between the fire place and chopping area so that the wood is within reach but not close enough that it will set on fire or you will fall over it, and close enough to the chopping area so that you are not carrying the wood to far but not too close that you are in danger from flying bits whilst someone is chopping.

To keep everything neat, you need to mark out your woodpile so different sizes of wood can be collected together neatly, so when you need to add wood you don't have to search through a great big heap to find what you want. Although there are a number of different methods of constructing a woodpile, the simplest is using 10 short 'stakes', and a long length of old rope, laid out like this.

Once this has been laid out, you can begin cutting up your wood in the chopping area. Chop or saw the wood into manageable lengths, which will depend on the size of the fire you are using and the size of your fireplace. The different sizes of wood should be grouped together:

The first should be kindling, the small thin bits to start the fire with. This will be mainly small twigs, which can be found at the bottom of hedges and in undergrowth. This should always be dead wood - it should snap easily with a sharp 'crack' when broken. You can also collect the 'bits' from the chopping area that an axe will produce. Scrunched-up dry newspaper and even sweet wrappers can be added to the kindling pile.

The next section is the slightly thicker (around 5-15mm diameter) wood to place on top of kindling to get the fire going. These can probably be jumped on and snapped, or even broken by hand rather than sawn or chopped (much easier) - these should be kept quite short so they can lay on the kindling without being 'up in the air' when placed together.

The next two sections are your logs, the real burning bits. How thick these will be is for you to decide as to the type of fire you want, fast and flames (thin, 15-30mm diameter) or slow and hot (thick, 30+mm diameter). Chop the wood into lengths about the length of your fire pit/altar fire.

You may have more or less sections if you wish, but these are probably all you will need for most fires.

Once the pile has been stacked, fill it up again before lighting the next fire, or if you are having a continuous fire, such as keeping a large water boiler hot, you will have to allocate some time(s) during the day for more chopping. Never let the wood pile become low.

The pile should be kept dry at all times, as wet wood is very difficult to burn. The best way is either to pitch a shelter or old tent over the pile, or at the very least drape an old groundsheet kept over the top of the pile when it is not being added to or used. This will, of course, not help if your campsite floods - but it will keep off most things except torrential downpours.

A supply of kindling and newspaper should be kept somewhere dry (such as in the minibus) so if everything gets completely soaked there is still a chance of getting a fire going. You will find you need much more kindling with wet wood as it has to dry before it burns.

If larger wood gets wet, this can be placed on top of an altar fire grill to 'steam' dry, but do keep an eye on it as it will start to burn after a while.

When selecting wood, there is a short rhyme to help you remember burning properties (have an 'identify the wood' evening!):

*These hardwoods burn well and slowly -
Ash, Beech, Hawthorn, Oak, and Holly;
Softwoods flare up quick and fine,
Birch, Fir, Hazel, Larch, and Pine;
Elm and Willow you'll regret,
Chestnut green and Sycamore wet.*