

House Helper Question – December 18, 2007

What's the difference between a ventless and regular fireplace? Which one is a better heat source? What about gas logs?

The better choice in your particular situation will depend upon your needs, your preference for the look and function of the fireplace and the size of the space.

The traditional fireplace with a vertical masonry chimney can burn either wood or gas logs. The primary downside is the lack of efficiency – 85% or more of the heat generated escapes through the chimney. For gas logs, the damper is permanently fixed open and allows heat to escape from the house when not in use, even with glass doors. There are concerns regarding indoor air pollution and inconvenience in the event of a downdraft that forces ashes or soot all over a room.

Ventless fireplaces are gas units that address the efficiency issues of the traditional fireplace. They are highly efficient and can be easily installed almost anywhere within the home. The intent was to create units so efficient that the emission of pollutants back into the home would be minimal. There is significant debate among industry experts regarding the levels of pollutants (carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide and particulates) they generate that can degrade indoor air quality. Most manufacturers now instruct owners to open a window when the unit is operating.

Direct-vent is a relatively new option. A direct-vent fireplace is a sealed unit that separates the firebox from the indoor air. Combustible air is drawn in from the outside and gases and particulates vent directly to the outside. Heat chambers capture heat and transfer it into the room. These are safe and very efficient units, however, the fire is sealed inside the firebox behind glass that does not open.

Before buying consult a reputable, professional fireplace company that can provide additional expertise on your particular installation. Also, as with any gas product, install a carbon monoxide detector for your safety and peace of mind.