

Answers to Your Burning Questions: Open Burning in Massachusetts

If you're like most Massachusetts residents, you'll spend a lot of your time every spring preparing your lawn and garden for the warm months of renewal and growth ahead. A big part of your job will be cleaning up tree limbs, brush and other remnants of winter storms-- and figuring out what to do with all that debris.

Open burning might be the first thing that comes to your mind. While it is still allowed in most Massachusetts towns and cities, open burning has its distinct disadvantages. The combustion process releases large amounts of carbon dioxide, other gases and solid substances directly into the air for people to breathe. And, of course, disposal of materials is never as good for the environment as using them again in a different form. Natural debris can be chipped or composted into landscaping material.

Still, there are times when open burning is the best or only option. Even then, there are limits on what can be burned and when, as well as important public health and safety requirements. This brochure will answer your questions about open burning and offer you suggestions on doing it right.

Why are there limits on open burning in Massachusetts?

The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and your local fire department limit open burning for public health and safety purposes. Open burning pollutes the air and can make it difficult for people with respiratory problems to breathe. When the air is stagnant, open burning can pose smoke and odor nuisances -- and health risks -- to nearby residents, particularly in densely populated areas. Open burning can also pose a safety risk when it is not adequately controlled. The limits on open burning do not apply to outdoor cooking.

What can be burned, when and under what conditions?

In most of the state's towns and cities, homeowners are allowed to burn brush, cane, driftwood and forestry debris -- not including grass, hay, leaves or stumps -- between January 15 and May 1, so long as the open burning takes place:

- With the permission of the local fire department;
- Between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.;
- When the air is circulating well but winds are light;
- No less than 75 feet away from all dwellings; and
- As close as possible to the source of material(s) to be burned.

Fungus-infected elmwood and other materials normally associated with agriculture and agricultural land clearing -- such as tree prunings, dead raspberry stalks, blueberry patches for pruning purposes and disease-infected beehives -- may also be burned with fire department permission.

What other types of outdoor fires are allowed?

With the fire department's approval and supervision, a community may schedule:

- Christmas tree burning between December 26 and January 7 (although recycling trees by chipping them into landscaping material or "planting" them in dunes to control beach erosion are more beneficial to the environment);

- One ceremonial bonfire each year to observe a municipal, state or national event; and
- A bonfire between July 2 and July 6 in observance of Independence Day.

With specific approval from DEP, local fire departments may also stage outdoor fires for purposes of fire prevention or protection research and training.

Outdoor cooking is allowed year-round in all communities and is *not* subject to open burning limits.

What types of open burning are not allowed?

There are no circumstances under which it is legal to burn grass, hay, leaves, stumps or tires. They simply do not burn as "cleanly" as those materials that may legally be burned. All of them produce acrid smoke that causes nuisance conditions and threatens people's health. When tires are burned, they produce noxious gases and petroleum residue, both of which can be harmful to people and the environment.

In addition, the burning of brush, cane, driftwood and forestry debris from commercial or industrial land clearing is prohibited state wide.

Are there any communities in which open burning is not allowed at all?

Yes.

Open burning is prohibited in 22 of the state's largest cities and towns due to the density of population and close proximity of buildings within their borders: Arlington, Belmont, Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Chelsea, Chicopee, Everett, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Malden, Medford, New Bedford, Newton, Somerville, Springfield, Waltham, Watertown, West Springfield and Worcester.

Open Burning Guidelines

First things first:

- Contact your local fire department for information on obtaining an open burning permit.

Starting the fire:

- Remove all grass from the area where you will be burning.
- Try to start the fire with natural "kindling" -- never with gasoline or charcoal lighter fluid. If you must use an artificial helper, kerosene is probably safest.

While burning:

- Never add brush that is green or wet. It will reduce the efficiency of the fire and produce thick smoke.
- Someone must attend the fire until it's completely out. You will need a hose or other supply of water and a shovel or rake for controlling the fire.

Putting the fire out:

- Burn the fire down to the coals, drown them with water, spread them out, then drown them again