

When the Firewood Runs Out

One of the most important, and most overlooked, survival supplies is firewood. That's especially true for those of us who live "up north" where surviving winter is a serious contest during normal years, let alone during a post-disaster time, when we don't have electricity and/or gas for our furnaces.

The few people who actually still heat with wood will be at an advantage at that time. An advantage that the rest of us will be wishing we had.

In the last few years, my home state was hit with Winter Storm Uri (February 2021) and Winter Storm Heather (January 2024). Both were serious problems in a state where we're used to measuring temperatures that top 100°F for several months of the year. While I wasn't seriously impacted by either of those storms, family members were, giving me a fresh appreciation of just how difficult a survival problem Old Man Winter can be, when he sets his mind to it.

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As people lost power in those storms, they also lost heating for their homes. That's no surprise to those of us who are preppers; but I'm sure it was a surprise to many of them. Even my own daughter, who had grown up in a prepper home (my home), was surprised when her home heating went out, and the temperature in her home started dropping. She lives 2 ½ hours away, so coming to stay with us would have been a bit difficult; but fortunately for my grandkids, her in-laws were much closer; not only that, but fortunately they had power.

Another relative, a brother-in-law is also a prepper and got caught in the same storms. His big problem ended up being that his neighbors raided his wood pile, leaving him without enough wood to heat his own home. Obviously, the wood pile wasn't secured well enough; but just how do you keep people from stealing firewood?

Wood – Our Backup Heating Source

Most of the preppers I know use wood as their backup fuel source for heating and cooking. That makes sense, considering that wood has been mankind's primary fuel source throughout history. While we have largely moved on to other fuel sources as our primary means of heating and cooking, wood is still a good alternative or backup.

Of course, there are those in the prepping community who use other fuel sources for heating, such as propane. More power to them, if that's what they choose. But I'd be willing to bet that once they reach a point where they can't get any more propane, they'll be turning to wood, just like the rest of us.

But those won't be the only people who are turning to wood. None of my brother-in-law's neighbors, the ones that stole his firewood, normally use wood for heating. Nor are any of them preppers. They just reacted to the need, seeing his pile of wood and deciding that it was free for the taking. That's probably exactly what will happen in any other emergency which leaves people without heat.

Do You Have Enough?

The first question any of us need to be asking ourselves is whether we actually have enough firewood to get us through an emergency, even without neighbors stealing it. Heating a home with wood as our primary fuel source requires much more firewood than most people realize. Those who do heat their

homes with wood typically go through four to six full cords of wood per winter. And that's good hardwood firewood, not pine.

Softwoods don't have as much energy density as hardwoods do. Pine and other softwoods might be great for starting a fire, as they ignite easily. But once the fire is started, you want to switch over to a good solid hardwood as soon as possible. So, other than a little bit to help you get your fires going, your woodpile really shouldn't be pine, but hardwood.

Ok, so let's say that you've got a good woodpile going, having stocked those four to six cords I mentioned a moment ago. What do you do when that runs out? That might get you through the first winter; but in the case of a true TEOTWAWKI event, you're going to need to get through more than just one winter.

The Classic Answer is Wrong

You've probably seen some movie where people were burning furniture or wood from abandoned houses to keep warm in an emergency. There are a couple of things wrong with that. First of all, houses are made of a combination of pine and what is known as "engineered wood." That means things like plywood, MDF (medium density fiberboard) and OSB (oriented strand board). Since both MDF and OSB are made of pine, we can basically say that houses are made of pine; at least as far as the wood parts are concerned.

What that means is that the wood in our houses will burn quickly, without putting off a lot of heat.

In other words, tearing apart abandoned homes, with the idea of using the wood for heating, is a losing game. You would probably expend more energy tearing the houses apart, than you would receive in heat for your own home. The best "heating" you would receive is the heat your muscles would generate, doing all that work.

Most furniture would probably be even worse, unless it is old.

So much of the furniture today is made of MDF, which is nothing more than wood fibers, pressed together with an adhesive. While it will burn; it won't provide any more heat than pine will. The only furniture that will provide decent heating is hardwood furniture. But even if you do find some hardwood furniture in an abandoned home somewhere, just how long do you think you're going to be able to keep your home warm with it?

You Need a Good Wood Source

Part of anyone's survival planning has to be finding good sources of hardwood trees, which they can keep in their mental reserve, to be cut for firewood when the time comes. I'm not talking about the tree on the corner or in the park; someone will probably beat you to those. I'm talking about trees out in the country, close enough that you can get to them and bring the wood you cut home.

Looking for those trees will also give you the opportunity to learn something about tree identification, which will be necessary for selecting the best trees for your firewood. If you're going to be going through all that work, cutting wood, you might as well select the trees which will give you the most heat for your effort.

Another thing you will want to do is to stockpile gasoline. That's tricky to do, as the most highly combustible hydrocarbons from gasoline are also the first things to evaporate. That's why it's recommended to not store gasoline for more than six months; or 12 months with a fuel stabilizer.

You can get more storage out of gasoline by storing it in sealed metal cans. They did that effectively back in World War II, to send gasoline in five-gallon sealed cans to the troops fighting in the Pacific. It still works today, just as long as we make sure that the cans are properly sealed. Avoid plastic gas cans, as the hydrocarbons can leach out right through the

plastic.

Even with storing gas in metal cans, chances are that you're going to eventually need a backup method for cutting down trees and bucking the logs into sections that you can take home. That means things like axes and saws. But just because you are eventually going to be using those axes and saws, doesn't mean that you shouldn't do what you can, so that you can use your chainsaw for as long as possible.

Another thing you're going to want to be able to use for as long as possible is your vehicle. While you will eventually need to haul wood with some sort of cart, hauling wood is one of the few things that you should actually start your truck or SUV up for. Just make sure that you load as much as you can in it and that you take the shortest route, so that you don't have to run the engine any more than absolutely necessary. Your fuel will be limited, so you'll want to get the most out of it you can.

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Another Consideration

While we're all probably going to need to be ready to heat with wood, we should do what we can to look at other options. One of the best of these options is passive solar heating. Passive solar can be added to pretty much any home, through the not-so-simple expedient of building a sun room. Placed on the south side of the house, with a large opening into the main part of the house, a properly designed sun room can go a long way towards augmenting the heat you get from wood. That

will mean less wood cutting and hauling, while maintaining a warmer home.

Granted, building a sun room isn't cheap. All that glass costs money. But if you truly want to be able to keep your home warm in the winter, when the power goes out, it's definitely the way to go.