

# Fall HOME Improvement

## Before you light your first fire this winter

**B**efore fireplace season hits full swing, homeowners might want to brush up on a few fireplace facts so they can safely enjoy nights spent by the crackling flames.

The National Protection Agency recommends that chimneys be swept at least once per year. After a lengthy period of non-use, various issues could be affecting the chimney, many of which might not be noticeable to an untrained eye. A full inspection of the chimney might be in order as well. Homeowners who plan to use their chimneys should request a Level 1 inspection, which examines the soundness of the chimney structure and flue as well as the basic appliance installation and connections. Technicians also will verify if the chimney is free of obstruction and combustible deposits.

Homeowners should inspect their chimney dampers before lighting their first fires of the season. Dampers should open and close smoothly.

Firewood is another thing homeowners must consider. Well-seasoned firewood works best, wood that is not well-seasoned will produce more smoke than heat. In addition, the home improvement resource This Old House recommends using dense wood that's been split and stored in a high and dry place for at least six months. Oak is an example of dense wood. Avoid softwoods like pine. Pine can produce a lot of creosote, which is highly flammable, and as it builds up in a chimney, the risk for a chimney fire increases. Choosing the right wood, making sure it's well-seasoned and having a chimney professionally cleaned can reduce the risk of a creosote-related chimney fire. A Level 1 inspection should determine if there are potentially dangerous levels of creosote deposits in the chimney.

# As summer turns to fall, protect decks from winter weather

Decks make for great gathering places when the weather permits. Decks are where many people spend their free time and eat their meals come spring and summer, when the temperatures climb and the sun sets well into the evening. But as summer turns to fall, homeowners must take measures to protect their decks from potentially harsh winter weather.

- **Inspect the deck for problems.** Decks tend to be used more often in summer than any other time of year. That makes fall and early winter an ideal time to inspect for wear and tear and any additional issues that may have cropped up throughout the summer. Damaged boards and loose handrails should be fixed before winter arrives, especially for homeowners who plan to use their decks in winter. Fixing such issues in winter and even into spring may be difficult thanks to harsh conditions, so make good use of the relatively calm autumn weather to fix any issues on the deck.

- **Clear the deck of potted plants.** Even homeowners who intend to use their decks in winter should remove potted plants from the deck in the fall. The home improvement experts at HGTV note that moisture can get trapped between deck



boards and plastic, wood or ceramic containers in cold weather, and that can contribute to mildew, discoloration or decay.

- **Store unnecessary furniture.** Homeowners who like to sit on their decks in winter will no doubt want to leave some furniture out over the winter. But those with lots of furniture for entertaining

guests can likely move the majority of that furniture into a garage or shed for the winter. HGTV notes that doing so will prevent the potential formation of blemishes on the deck that can result from inconsistent weathering.

- **Remove snow, carefully.** Prolonged contact with snow and ice can damage a deck. As a result, homeowners should clear

snow from their decks when accumulation is significant. HGTV recommends using a snow blower on the deck to avoid scarring. If a shovel must be used, push snow with the planks to reduce damaging the deck.

Homeowners who take steps to protect their decks throughout the winter can ensure it's ready when entertaining season returns in the spring.

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**F**all means back to busy schedules and it can be challenging to find time to get a wholesome, homemade family meal on the table.

This quick and nutritious meal using canned foods can help cut down on meal prep, so you spend less time in the kitchen and more time together with your family doing the things you love.

### Pumpkin Mac and Cheese

- 8 ounces rotini or medium shell pasta
- 5 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 can (12 ounces) evaporated milk
- 1 cup milk
- 1/2 cup canned pumpkin
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 2 cups shredded Swiss or Gruyere cheese
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 1/4 cup breadcrumbs



Cook pasta according to package directions; drain and set aside.

Heat oven to 375 F.

Grease 1 1/2-quart baking dish. In 4-quart saucepan over medium heat, melt 3 tablespoons butter. Stir in flour; cook 1 minute. Gradually stir in evaporated milk and milk; cook until mixture is thickened and smooth. Stir in pumpkin, salt, pepper and nutmeg.

Remove from heat; whisk in cheeses until smooth. Stir in cooked pasta; toss to mix well. Spoon into baking dish.

Melt remaining butter; stir in breadcrumbs to coat well. Sprinkle on top of casserole. Bake 30 minutes, or until sauce is bubbly and mixture is golden.

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