

Bonfire Information Leaflet

PROBLEMS...

Air Pollution

Burning garden waste produces smoke, especially if it is damp and smouldering. This will contain pollutants including carbon monoxide, dioxins and particles. Burning plastic, rubber or painted materials not only creates an unpleasant smell but also produces a range of toxic compounds. Your bonfire will also add to the general background level of air pollution.

Health Effects

Emissions from bonfires can have damaging health effects. Serious harm is unlikely if exposure to bonfire smoke is brief. However problems may be caused for asthmatics, bronchitis sufferers, people with heart conditions and children.

Nuisance

The smoke, smuts and smell from bonfires are the subject of many complaints to local authorities. Smoke prevents your neighbours from enjoying their gardens, opening windows or hanging washing out, and reduces visibility in the neighbourhood and on roads. Allotments near homes can cause particular problems, if plot holders persistently burn waste.

Safety

Fire can spread to fences or buildings and scorch trees and plants. Exploding bottles and cans are a hazard when rubbish is burned. Piles of garden waste are often used as a refuge by animals, so look out for hibernating wildlife and sleeping pets.

SOLUTIONS...

Composting

Rather than burning garden waste or putting food waste in the dustbin where it will end up buried or incinerated, a compost bin will produce a useful soil conditioner, saving money on commercial products. Woody waste can be shredded to make it suitable for composting or mulching; you can buy or hire shredders and some allotment societies have their own. If using a shredder, be considerate as they can be very noisy. Take care not to replace one nuisance with another.

Advice on composting is available from the local authority and from gardening organisations.

Recycling

Household waste should certainly not be burned on a bonfire. Many items can be recycled and you can find out about council facilities for recycling by telephoning 606 2004. Garden waste should not be mixed with other household waste if possible. Waste can also be taken to the local civic amenity site and you can telephone 255 1444 to find out which is the nearest to you. Old beds and sofas are not suitable for burning, but if you phone 606 2004 and ask for the council ERIC service, who can pick up large items like this for a small charge.

THE LAW...

It is a common misconception that there are specific bylaws that prohibit garden bonfires or specify times they can be lit - there aren't. Very occasionally a bonfire is the best practicable way to dispose of garden waste that cannot be composted - such as diseased plant material or tough woody waste. If only dry garden waste is burnt the occasional bonfire should not cause a major problem. However, where a neighbour is causing a problem by burning rubbish the law is on your side. Under the *Environmental Protection Act (EPA) 1990*, a statutory nuisance includes "smoke, fumes or gases

emitted from premises so as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance". In practice, to be considered a statutory nuisance, a bonfire would have to be a persistent problem, interfering substantially with your well being, comfort or enjoyment of your property. If a bonfire of industrial/commercial waste is emitting black smoke it is dealt with under the Clean Air Act 1993.

If bothered by smoke, approach your neighbour and explain the problem. You might feel awkward, but they may not be aware of the distress they are causing and it will hopefully make them more considerate in the future. If this fails, contact your local council's environmental health department. They must investigate your complaint and can issue a nuisance abatement notice under the EPA. The Act also allows you to take private action in the magistrates' court. If the fire is only occasional it is unlikely to be considered a nuisance in law. Similarly, if you are being troubled by bonfires from different neighbours, each only burning occasionally, a nuisance action would be difficult as there are several offenders. In this situation encourage them to consider the alternatives. Finally, under the *Highways Act 1980* anyone lighting a fire and allowing smoke to drift across a road faces a fine if it endangers traffic. Contact the police in this case.

Barbecues

Barbecues can also cause a smoke problem - especially if you use lighter fuel. If the weather is still and sunny, a barbecue will contribute to photochemical smog (this is formed in the summer, by the action of sunlight on pollutants). Again, be considerate. If you are having a barbecue - tell your neighbours. Don't ignite it when they've got their washing out, and if it's windy check that smoke won't blow straight into neighbouring properties.

If you still want to have a bonfire

A bonfire can be a convenient way of getting rid of a large amount of waste, or perhaps you want a bonfire just for fun - on Guy Fawkes night for instance. If a bonfire is the most practicable and environmentally friendly way to dispose of dry garden waste (for example, diseased plant material that cannot be composted) warn your neighbours - they are much less likely to complain. Remember that bonfire and barbecue parties can cause noise as well as smoke.

Bonfire Guidelines

If a bonfire is the best practicable option for disposing of garden waste, follow these guidelines and the chances are you won't annoy your neighbours or cause a serious nuisance.

- **Only burn dry material**
- **Never burn household rubbish, rubber tyres, or anything containing plastic, foam or paint**
- **Never use old engine oil, maths or petrol to light the fire or to encourage it**
- **Avoid lighting a fire in unsuitable weather conditions - smoke hangs in the air on damp, still days and in the evening. If it is windy, smoke may be blown into neighbours' gardens and across roads**
- **Avoid burning when air pollution in your area is high or very high. This information is included in weather forecasts, or you can check <http://www.airquality.co.uk>**
- **Always have a hose available to regulate or put the fire out if the bonfire gets out of control.**
- **Never leave a fire unattended or leave it to smoulder - douse it with water before leaving the site.**