



Clean Heat

A pellet stove is a kinder, gentler—and cheaper—way to warm your home this winter

by Keith Pandolfi

The first time Brenda Flick fired up a pellet stove was on a cold winter's day in 2005. And her life hasn't been the same since. Within a year, she had quit her job, rented some retail space, and started selling them herself. "I knew it was the right time and the right product for the consumer, the country, and the environment," says Flick, in perfect true-believer fashion.

What convinced her was discovering that a pellet stove could heat her entire 3,000-square-foot ranch house for less than \$120 a month. (She paid up to \$200 with gas.) Skeptical at first, she set the thermostat for the furnace at 55 degrees, just in case the stove needed some extra help. The machinery never kicked on; it didn't have to.

Flick—now the owner, with husband Ron, of Heavenly Hearth in Amelia, Ohio—may be an extreme example, but a lot of homeowners share her enthusiasm. Perhaps it's because of the energy savings these stoves provide, or the fact that they offer an eco-friendly heating option. Fueled by pellets made from recycled, super-compressed sawdust, they not only conserve trees, they also burn hotter and cleaner than conventional woodstoves or fireplaces, producing minimal smoke and ash.

According to retailers, sales of pellet stoves are, dare we say it, on fire. The Washington, D.C. based Pellet Fuels Institute says around 67,000 of them were sold to U.S. homeowners in 2004; 118,000 in 2005; and about 200,000 are projected to sell this winter. "This is definitely going to be the year for them. There is no doubt in my mind," says Melvin Fallin, owner of **Thomaston Hardware** in **Thomaston**, Georgia. While he's been selling pellet stoves for about a decade, Fallin is seeing heightened demand now as customers try desperately to combat the rising costs of gas, oil, and propane.

"I got a load of them in the week before last, and I've already sold three," says Fallin. Not a big deal until you consider that we talked to him back in August, when the temperature in Georgia was a scorching 99 degrees. The story's the same up north at Berkshire Fireplace in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where owner Joe Galok says sales of pellet stoves have already increased by 25 percent over last year. So how do these

little firepots work? You start by pouring the pellets into the stove's hopper, which usually holds 40 to 55 pounds of them at a time. The pellets are then fed automatically into a burn chamber, where they're incinerated with the help of a fan that forces combustion air into the chamber. Another fan blows the hot air out into your house. Some models require you light the fire yourself, others let you push a button on the stove (or a remote control!) to fire them up; fully automatic versions are attached to a thermostat and turn on or off depending on the selected heat level.

Because pellet stoves work on the principle of convection, not radiation, the surface stays relatively cool, which means you can install them as little as three inches away from the wall. The only requirement is a nearby electrical outlet to power the feed system and fans (and a battery back up in case the electricity goes out). Freestanding models are vented through a 3- to 5-inch double-wall pipe, but pellet burners are also available as fireplace inserts, which vent through a stainless-steel lining that runs up your chimney.

Depending on the size and type of stove you choose, you can expect to lay out between \$1,500 and \$3,500 for the initial investment. While most pellet enthusiasts insist that you'll recoup your money in just a few years through dramatically lower heating bills, you should do some math before taking the plunge. The pellets themselves are typically sold in 40-pound bags. Flick sells them for about \$5.25 a bag, or \$240 a ton, though prices vary by region. You'll probably need about three tons—and the space to store the bags—to get you through the winter.

The stoves might also need a little more maintenance than your current heating system. Just like the family pet, they require a regular feeding schedule. You'll need to load in pellets every four or five days, depending on the size of the hopper and how often you use the stove. Since pellets burn with greater than 99 percent efficiency, they leave little ash behind (about one gram per hour), but you'll still have to clean out what little remains every week or so.

Finally, unlike that big, ugly furnace in the basement, most pellet stoves are installed in your living space, so you'll need to consider aesthetics. There's a wide range of choices, from boxy, industrial looking models to ones that resemble old-world wood burners. Many have viewing windows, so you can gaze at the flames. You true romantics can even get fake logs that fit right inside the window—a constant reminder of what, exactly, these stoves are saving.

The Great Pellet Shortage

Now that we've told you all of the advantages of pellet stoves, there's something else you should know. Last year, some people had a heck of a time finding pellets. Even our secret-source-savvy editor in chief, Scott Omelianuk, couldn't track them down, resorting to tossing in dried feed corn, little bits of dowels, and scraps of cedar shingles. (Ed. note: The only thing you can burn in one of these is pellets.)

The reason for last year's shortage was both higher-than-expected demand and the fact that a number of U.S. pellet manufacturers had existing contracts with sellers in Europe, where the stoves have been popular for decades. To meet the growing need, some local retailers are resorting to new sources. Case in point: The owners of **Thomaston Hardware** in **Thomaston**, Georgia, have struck up a deal with a local wood flooring company to start manufacturing their own pellets.

If you're thinking about getting a stove, lay in your pellet supply early. "I tell everybody the same thing," says Joe Galok, owner of Berkshire Fireplace in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. "There are enough pellets for everybody—but not for everybody all at once." For info on where to find them in your area, go to pelletheat.org

Where to find it:

Pellet-stove dealers:

Heavenly Hearth
Amelia, OH
513-943-0800

Thomaston Hardware Company
Thomaston, GA
706-647-8194

Berkshire Fireplace, Pool & Spa
Pittsfield, MA
413-442-5110

Special thanks to:

Pellet Fuels Institute
Arlington, VA
709-522-6778.

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