

Garden Bonfires

The bonfire gets its name from medieval bon-fires of animal bones - and while modern day bonfire ingredients may not be as gruesome, they still cause pollution and local nuisance. Bonfires may be fun, but they are not usually the most environmentally friendly way of getting rid of your rubbish.

What's wrong with a good bonfire?

Bonfires can be very irritating to neighbours - the council gets many complaints about smoke and smells. Smoke stops your neighbours enjoying their gardens, opening windows or hanging out washing, and it reduces visibility in the neighbourhood and on roads.



Bonfires cause air pollution. Burning garden waste produces smoke, especially if it is damp and smouldering rather than dry and blazing. Like tobacco smoke, this will contain the poisonous gas carbon monoxide and other noxious or irritating compounds. Burning plastic, rubber or painted materials not only creates an unpleasant smell but also produces a range of poisonous compounds. These compounds can all have damaging health effects, but if exposure to bonfire smoke is short-lived, serious harm is unlikely. Problems may be caused for asthmatics, bronchitis sufferers or those with heart conditions and children. Even if the immediate health risk is small, your bonfire will be adding to the general background level of air pollution. Air quality in the UK often hits the official 'poor' level - do you really want to make it worse ?

Weather conditions alter how your bonfire smoke will affect neighbours. If the air is still, particularly in the later afternoon or evening, smoke will linger. A dry blazing bonfire will lift smoke and fumes upwards. If it is too windy, smoke may blow into neighbouring properties and across roads causing annoyance or danger.

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

What's the alternative?

Bonfires are not the best disposal method for rubbish – other options are available.

- **Composting and recycling**

Most garden and kitchen waste - even cardboard and paper - can be recycled into compost. Rather than burning garden waste or putting food 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. Household waste should certainly not be burned on a bonfire - paper, cardboard and plastics all have recycling schemes and many household items can be recycled or reused.

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. However, shredders can be noisy - so don't replace one nuisance with another.

Advice on composting is available from the following:-

- o National Centre for Organic Gardening, Ryton on Dunsmore, Coventry CV8 3LG.
Tel: 024 7630 3517
- o Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, Powys SY20 9AZ.
- o Tel: 016 5470 2400

- **Collection**

- o Garden waste should not normally be mixed with other household waste. Garden waste can be taken to the civic amenity site at Nathan Way in Thamesmead or can be collected by the council, although there is a charge.
- o Old beds and sofas are not suitable for burning and if you can't take them to Nathan Way, a Special Collection can be arranged - contact CleanSweep on 020 8291 4664 to arrange a collection.
- o Old furniture and household appliances (fridges, cookers and washing machines) can be collected for re-use. Contact Respond on 020 8310 8808 - from 1st September 2003 phone 020 8316 1099.

But I need 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. Some people like making fires - perhaps its part of human nature! If you must have a bonfire, it's only fair to warn your neighbours (and they are much less likely to complain if you do). Remember that bonfire and barbecue parties can cause noise as well as smoke - two good reasons for letting them know in advance. And don't save up your old junk to burn on bonfire night - why not go to an organised event instead?

Good bonfire guidelines

So you can't resist it. If you are determined to have a bonfire, follow these guidelines and the chances are you won't 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, meths 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 neighbouring gardens and across roads.
- Avoid burning at weekends and on bank holidays when people want to enjoy their gardens.
- Avoid burning when the air quality in your area is 'poor' or 'very poor'. (You can check this by phoning 0800 556677, or looking at Ceefax or Teletext or by checking at www.defra.gov.uk).
- Never leave a fire unattended or leave it to smoulder - douse it with water if necessary.

What do I do if I've got a bonfire problem?

You have several options if you are bothered by persistent bonfire smoke:-

- It is best to approach your neighbour first 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. Perhaps you could use this leaflet as a basis for discussion?
- If you feel you cannot talk to your neighbour without help, you could try mediation. Greenwich Mediation is an independent organisation using trained mediators to help people find mutually acceptable solutions to neighbour problems (including problems with bonfires). Their service is without charge and they can be contacted on 020 8858 3014.
- If this approach fails, contact the Environmental Protection Team. We will take reasonable steps to investigate your complaint and can take action under the Environmental Protection Act by issuing a nuisance abatement notice. The same Act allows you to take private action in the magistrates court. The Environmental Protection Team can advise on all these options.
- If you are being troubled by a series of bonfires from different neighbours, each one of whom only burns occasionally, this may not be considered a nuisance. In this situation, all you can do is encourage your neighbours to consider alternatives. Again, perhaps you could use this leaflet to talk to them? Or raise the issue at the local Residents or Tenants Association or the Neighbourhood Watch?
- 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.

What's the legal position?

Many people assume that there are specific by-laws to prohibit bonfires. There aren't. If used sensitively, the occasional bonfire or barbecue should not cause a major problem and an outright ban would be unreasonable. It would be difficult to enforce and occasionally a bonfire is the best practicable way to dispose of garden waste. However, if a neighbour is causing a nuisance by burning rubbish the law is on your side. Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, a statutory nuisance includes 'smoke, fumes or gasses emitted from premises so as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance'. In practice, to be considered a nuisance, a bonfire would have to be a regular problem and interfering substantially with your well being, comfort or enjoyment of your property. Contact the Environmental Protection Team for a copy of the NSCA fact sheet 'Pollution, Nuisance and the Law' which explains the legal position in more detail.

This information is very substantially based on the NSCA's leaflet "Bonfires". Used with permission. Contact the NSCA at www.nsc.org.uk

Environmental Protection Team
Directorate of Public Services
London Borough of Greenwich
Riverside House
Woolwich High Street
SE18 6DN

Tel: 020 8921 8166 or 8167
Fax: 020 8921 8064
Email: environmental.protection@greenwich.gov.uk