

"Vented" Gas Log Sets...For An Inexpensive Gas Fireplace, "Without The Heat"

Mar 07 '02

The Bottom Line Vented **Decorative** Gas Log Sets are not Heaters. They are cost effective alternatives to heater rated gas fireplace inserts, for those who don't want any heat but, want instant ambiance.

This is an updated look at the Decorative rated vented gas log sets available. The first thing I wanted to stress, is that these products are not energy efficient. They are approved and classified as **Decorative** gas appliances. They are designed for just that, providing a decorative effects flame in your existing vented wood fireplace. Just don't buy one, expecting them to produce any useable heat. They will invariably use more energy than they deliver.

Converting an existng wood burning, masonry or steel fabricated fireplace to a gas-fired unit has never been easier. Decorative, retrofit Gas Log Sets are considered the poor cousins to the Heater rated gas fireplace inserts by many people. They are the least expensive retrofit option and there are a number of pro's and con's to consider before buying one.

WHO LOVES THEM

Generally, anyone in a warmer climate, who doesn't want more heat added to a given room, but, wants a running fire in the fireplace for ambiance, without the mess and fuss associated with burning wood. These products are especially more popular in municipalities that have bans on burning wood during certain times of the year. More and more cities and towns throughout North America are concerned about smoke pollution, from wood fires, that tends to settle in low lying areas. So what's the point of having a fireplace, if you can't use it? In these cases, a number of people have turned to Gas Log Sets or Gas Fireplace Inserts, which meet local pollution restrictions.

There are also quite a few people who already have, well balanced, central heating systems that heat their homes adequately. They know that the old wood fireplace drew more heated air out of the house than it added and now they simply want to convert it to something they can light, at the flick of a switch. Again, the low fuss factor is the big sales feature.

WHO HATES THEM

Anyone who bought one, thanks to an over ambitious sales person, expecting the gas log set to generate more heat than their wood fireplace did. These are the unfortunate, dissatisfied owners of gas log sets, who didn't have the benefits of reading this review before they bought one.

Let's face facts, these products are designed to produce the illusion of a wood fire. They can never truly simulate a wood fire. Real wood fires change all the time, as the logs burn down, flare up, or as more wood is added. Wood fires are interactive events, requiring attention, poking, and chucking a bit more on top. Gas fireplaces do their very best to come close to these effects and improvements each year are bringing them closer. However, they aren't interactive, you shouldn't poke them or stoke them.

There have been "some" gas log sets I've seen recently are very realistic. Some have logs with knot holes and flames licking out at different spots. Most have ember beds with glowing ceramic fiber coals and control panels, that hide away all of the gas piping and controls behind a decorative front facia, or control panel.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

First consider, realistically, why you want to convert your masonry fireplace to gas and what you expect from it. Let me save you the time of reading this whole review. If you want supplementary heat for the room it's going in, move on to look at your options under gas-fireplace inserts which are almost all Heater rated.

As I've said above, Gas Log Sets are the least expensive gas-fired hearth products for converting an existing wood fireplace to gas. A gas log set is simply that, a burner, a gas control, usually, a cradle to hold it all together and a set of fake non-combustible logs. All are designed and positioned to simulate, as realistically as possible, a wood fire. Remember, a simulated realistic wood fire, is always subjective. What may look realistic to you may look pretty fake to me or vice versa. Realism is in the eye and the imagination of the beholder.

If you've decided that you don't want the fireplace to contribute any amount of heat to your home and you have no concerns about fuel costs or if you don't plan to use it very often, except for improving the ambiance when entertaining. The simple gas log set is the kind of product you should consider.

Since the average gas log set has no restrictions with regards to firebox size, they are usually set up to burn anywhere from 30,000 Btu's to 80,000 Btu's per hour or higher. Most larger gas log sets will burn two to three times more fuel than a heater rated insert. They will also use large amounts of secondary air from the room in which they are installed. In most cases they will draw **more heated air up the chimney than they can deliver to the room**. If you live in a colder area of the country, this means your central heating system must pick up the difference and work a little harder to maintain the comfort level you want. On the other hand, if you live in Florida or parts of California, it probably means you are happy, because the outside temperature is 75 F and you've got the air conditioning going. The fireplace is just on for effect.

UNVENTED GAS LOG SETS: DR. KEVORKIAN'S CHOICE

The only exception to this, "no heat rule", from certified Decorative vented gas log sets, is with the so-called 99.9% unvented gas log sets, which I view as; products for people with a death wish and I have already made my opinion clear on the dangers of unvented gas appliances in many previous reviews. Once again, don't buy unvented (vent-free, ventless) gas log sets and **if you do buy one, don't use it**, if you care about your health. Certainly, don't buy an unvented gas log set if you don't want heat added to the home. (In addition to increased humidity and indoor air pollution. Sorry, I couldn't resist slipping that in)

INSTALLATION CODE REQUIREMENTS FOR APPROVED VENTED GAS LOG SETS

The damper from the old wood fireplace must be disabled to remain in the open position or removed entirely.

This safety requirement of national installation codes is intended to ensure that no one will ever operate a gas fired log set with the damper closed. People who do that by accident with a wood fire are quickly engulfed in smoke from the fireplace. However, a gas log set will simply spill products of combustion into the room and could injure or even kill people, operated that way. That is the reason for the government mandated requirement to remove or disable the damper in the open position.

For all you "do-it-your-selves" out there, who think you can beat the system by leaving the damper in and turning it down to generate some heat. You are literally playing with fire and gambling with your health, maybe even your life. These products are not equipped with any safety devices for detecting spillage into the home and neither are human noses. What sometimes seems like a clever idea may end up killing you or someone you love.

SOME ADVANTAGES TO AN APPROVED "DECORATIVE" VENTED GAS LOG SET

The first advantage to a gas log set is that they are inexpensive units to buy. The chimney does not have to be lined, in fact, according to gas codes, it can't be lined with a gas log set, further lowering installation costs. A simple gas line to the fireplace and you're in business. No more wood to chop, no more ashes to clean out and remember, no heat from a vented "Decorative gas log set.

As opposed to a roaring wood fire, a gas log set is under the full control of the operator. It is the consumer's choice to flick it on or off, to turn it down, or to turn it up.

SOME DISADVANTAGES TO DECORATIVE VENTED GAS LOG SETS

The major drawbacks are that the operating fuel costs will be higher, there could be intermittent cold draft problems coming from the fireplace, **and there will usually be a continuous draw of heated air out of the home**, whether the gas log set is operating or not, after the damper is permanently opened. These products are considered to be negative energy users in your home, designed specifically for effects, aesthetics and ambiance.

While it is an open flame, **they are not designed to handle the drippings from cooking marshmallows and hotdogs**. Nor are they a good place to toss old newspapers and garbage. These kinds of creative, and fun activities will eventually clog up burner ports and create hazardous conditions, from delayed ignition to carbon monoxide poisoning. Trust me, I had to put that warning in, because folks have done it.

Although as I've stated above, the flame is controlled, the open flame may also be considered as a drawback if you have young children in the home. Children should always be supervised around any type of open flame. That would hold especially true for a wood fire as well.

CHOOSING THE BTU/H GAS INPUT RATE THAT'S SAFE

It is important to remember, if you choose to go with one of these products, don't necessarily choose the lowest Btu/H input. Studies have shown that if the fireplace temperatures are not kept high you can expect problems within your chimney, since it is not lined with a protective aluminum liner with a gas log set. With so much excess, dilution air from the room, mixing with the flue gases, the temperatures within the chimney can be relatively cool and may condense. 30,000 Btu's is considered the minimum input rate that one of these products should be fired at in order to generate sufficient draft and maintain a hot, dry chimney.

Personally, I recommend 40,000 to 50,000 Btu per hour for an average masonry chimney that is 25 to 35 feet high. (The average chimney height of a two or three storey home.) You will burn a little bit more gas per hour of operation, but, remember, these products are probably only going to be used a few hours per evening. A unit in this Btu range will generally burn hot enough to keep the chimney dry and venting all products of combustion. The hotter the chimney, the better the draft.

Cool damp chimneys will promote condensation and that moisture is acidic and will attack clay tile liners and mortar joints inside the chimney. In short, it is more cost effective to burn a little more gas and keep the chimney dry, than to have to rebuild the chimney every five years. If you have an outside steel chimney or a very tall chimney, you really should go with a higher Btu/H rating. I have a problem with the units that go higher than 60,000 Btu's. Bigger isn't always better, in this case.

GOOD AND BAD FEATURES

Most of these products come with push button ignition and adjustable gas valves for turning the flame height up and down. However, it is not advisable to run them on the low fire setting for very long if you want your chimney

to remain intact and good draft action to take the fumes away.

A gas log set can not be connected to a room thermostat and work. Since the room temperature will not be affected by any great amount whether it's on or off. Most people simply connect them to an on/off toggle type wall switch. However, a remote control can be connected to them for those of you who don't like to get off the couch. Just try not to mix it up with the controllers for the TV, stereo, DVD, VCR, and your robot dog that brings you beer.

Take time to check what material the simulated logs are constructed from. Older models mostly used concrete or a mixture very similar to concrete. The logs tended to be extremely heavy and not very attractive to look at. Something like elephant droppings. More recent products are using ceramic fiber logs. These do tend to give more glowing effects when the flames lick them. Whereas the heavy concrete type don't glow at all. My only concern, surrounding the ceramic fiber logs, is that there has not been enough studies done to ensure that these products are safe if they wear down or break. Ceramic fibers have been suspected of acting much the same as asbestos fibers once airborne. Ceramic fiber logs are also much more expensive than the older concrete type.

The good news is there are log sets on the market, constructed out of a lightweight yet hardened material, that is neither concrete or ceramic fiber. These logs do glow when the flames impinge and they are not substantially more expensive than concrete logs.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO A GAS LOG SET

If I have turned you off to the idea of a gas log set by any of the drawbacks mentioned above. Consider a low Btu input gas fireplace insert. When gas inserts are installed, the installer is required to also install an aluminum liner in the chimney (to protect the chimney from corrosion). Some come ready to fire at, as low as, 20,000 Btu's per hour, and with a gas turn down control that can be adjusted down to 10,000. Pick one with a low efficiency rating if you don't want supplementary heat. Ask if the circulation fan is optional and don't get one if you only want the decorative aspects of the product. (Personally, I would get it, as it is less expensive to buy with the original unit than to add at a later date.)

Some of the new low Btu inserts produce a great effects flame with very little energy waste and can be adjusted to provide very little heat. If the furnace ever quits working, you may find this product is a useful back up for emergencies, since most of them don't require any electrical supply in order to operate. More on Gas-Fired Inserts in another review.

GAS LOG SET MARKETS

Gas Log Sets have a place in the market. People in the southern states, where climate conditions don't call for heat, seem to enjoy the benefits of them. California has a large market for gas log sets. Alternatively, I have known people in the cold white north of Canada, whose heating systems were generating all the heat they needed, and they simply wanted an aesthetically pleasing flame in the fireplace. You can also usually find them in restaurants, pubs and other public places, where, their only job is to set the mood as you wine and dine.

PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSION OF A WOOD FIREPLACE

Use a competent and qualified gasfitter. They should come out and have a look at the job before installing the gas log set, to look at the best way to run the gas line and the type of damper system they will be disabling. Make certain the damper has been blocked in the open position or removed by the installing contractor.

Whenever someone has decided to convert an old used wood fireplace they should always have the existing

chimney cleaned, **(one last time!)** by a registered chimney sweep. The last thing you want is a lot of very flammable creosote inside the chimney with a roaring gas fire down below. Chimney fires have been known to burn down houses very quickly in extreme cases.

Before anyone installs either a gas log set or a gas fireplace insert, the inside of the fireplace should be thoroughly cleaned of soot and ashes. The cleaning should include any clean out ports for the ashes.

Installation of a gas log set is usually a pretty quick and easy job. Most installers can be in and out within a couple of hours, including time to check their own work for gas leaks and cleaning up. If they're competent, they've left no mess behind.

Whether you go for a gas log set or a gas fireplace insert, the greatest advantage is a clean burning fire, at the flick of a switch, with no wood to chop and haul and no ashes to clean up later.

Vented gas log sets are very simple systems, for people with a desire for a simple effects flame.

They are equipped with very few controls, other than a gas valve and a pilot. So, if that's what you've decided upon, you can expect it to run heat and trouble free for many years to come.