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## Corn burners becoming a popular heating option

Minnesotans are taking a Depression-era resource — corn — and setting it ablaze to cut fuel costs this season.

BY MOLLY MILLETT  
Pioneer Press

### OLD RESOURCE

Now that fall is here, Joe Messer spends his evenings tending the corn-burning stove in his sitting room — cleaning out the corn ash, pouring a bushel of dried corn kernels into the stove's hopper.

He doesn't mind the fuss, because this little stove has brought big savings: a \$900 reduction in heating bills last winter. With corn prices falling and energy bills rising, Messer expects the savings to be even more substantial this winter.

Messer is lucky to have his stove fired up for the season. With concerns about high energy costs, the demand for corn-burning stoves is heating up. Some consumers hope to get their stoves in time for the first snowfall; others sit on waiting lists stretching into the spring thaw.

"The shortage is tremendous," says corn farmer Jack Brake of J&N Multi-Fuel Stoves in Lismore, Minn. "It's like having the last Bud at the football game. Everyone wants it."

Manufacturers are bumping up production, but they can't keep pace with current demand.

"We'll produce 3,000 to 5,000 stoves this season, with our season ending May 31, but we could sell 20,000 stoves if we could make them," says Robert Walker, co-founder of Bixby Energy Systems, a Rogers, Minn. company that makes biomass energy systems. "The demand is that significant."

Burning corn for heat is not a new idea, just one that has teamed with modern technology.

"Farmers burned corn for heat during the Great Depression in the 1930s when they couldn't sell their corn, or they couldn't get much for it, and the energy prices were, relatively speaking, pretty high. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?" says Dennis Buffington, a Penn State University professor who studies corn as a fuel source.

Burning corn probably goes back farther than that. But stoves today are more efficient than they've ever been, according to Buffington, who maintains an educational Web site on corn stoves at <http://burn.corn.cas.psu.edu>.

Today's corn-burning stoves look like traditional wood-burning units. Some come with "wood logs" for a more authentic ambience. They are as easy to have installed as a gas clothes dryer. Price tags range from about \$1,800 to \$3,800 or more, with some models more automated than others. Some units burn only corn; others need a mixture of wood pellets or other materials (note: wood pellets are selling out fast this season).

Proponents of corn say it burns hot and cheap, and some choose it because they believe burning corn is more environmentally friendly.

While many corn-stove owners live in rural areas — where cornfields are in close proximity and the grain elevator is just down the road — managers at mills in the outlying metro say more urban dwellers are seeking them out this fall.

"We're getting about four times more calls than we did last year from all over — Woodbury, Oakdale, White Bear Lake, St. Paul," says Steve Marier, manager of Hugo Feed Mill and Hardware.

"Last year, we sold 40 of the stoves, and it was our best year," says Derek Hanson of Peterson's Country Mill in North Branch. "I've already sold 42 this year, and we can't keep them in stock. An order for 40 more is coming in this week, and they're all sold; every single stove in the November shipment is sold; and I have an order coming in January, and there are already people getting on the waiting list. We are getting calls from as far away as Edina and Maplewood."

### PRACTICAL FUEL?

But is tending a corn stove practical for today's busy lifestyle?

Professor Buffington has his doubts. "There are too many places where it's not feasible," he says. "You have to live in a corn production area, or close to one. Then, there's the matter of storing the corn. A woman who lives on the 33rd floor of an apartment building in New

York City wanted some advice on getting a corn-burning stove, and I had to tell her, 'I don't think corn burning is for you.' How would she get the corn to the 33rd floor? How would she dispose of the corn residue, the corn ash? How would she store the corn? Burning corn is not for everybody."

"We sold corn stoves a few years ago, but we had so many problems with the corn that people were using that we stopped," says Andy Bartlett, owner of Energy Savers in Oakdale, which sells gas and wood fireplaces and stoves.

Instead of using the dry, cleaned corn manufacturers advise for best results, Bartlett's customers were buying "50-pound bags of corn that was meant for bird food, with bits of corn cob and dust in it."

That caused clogs and other maintenance headaches, says Bartlett. The fuss of a stove is one reason corn has a tough time competing with other heating choices.

"We've been getting calls from people in the metro who are frustrated, they are finding it a little difficult to source the bagged corn," says Dan Lemke, spokesman for the Minnesota-based Agricultural Utilization Research Institute. "That's part of what makes petroleum fuels so convenient — in order to use them, you just turn up the thermostat, whereas with corn stoves, it can be a hassle to find a corn supplier."

## SAVINGS?

Another question: Will consumers really save money by buying a corn stove? Each homeowner needs to work out the numbers: At press time, the average price for a bushel of clean and dry corn (56 pounds) was about \$4, but bulk costs less. It's possible to go through two to six tons of corn or more during the heating season, depending on the size and insulation of the home, the size of the stove and the temperatures outside. Factor in transportation costs to the mill, and storage plans, too.

After dealing with propane bills of \$500 a month last winter, Pat Heiderscheid of Cambridge decided a corn-burning stove made financial sense. He's on a waiting list at Peterson's.

He says he won't mind the maintenance and upkeep.

"We've got a big house and six kids," says Heiderscheid. "The cost of propane is ridiculous, and I think this stove will mean a huge savings for us. I just wish I had bought it last year."

Molly Millett can be reached at 651-228-5505 or [mollymillett@pioneerpress.com](mailto:mollymillett@pioneerpress.com).

## INFORMATION

Visit <http://burncorn.cas.psu.edu> to get tips on shopping for a corn-burning stove, locate manufacturers, find out how to locate a supplier of shelled corn, learn the storage requirements of shelled corn and disposal of corn ash and more.

Here are a few local mills that sell clean, dry corn kernels to the public in bags or bulk, suitable for corn-burning stoves:

**Peterson's Country Mill**, North Branch, 651-674-4425 (also sells stoves)

**Hugo Feed Mill and Hardware**, Hugo, 651-429-3361

**Farmers Mill & Elevator**, Castle Rock, 1-800-645-5648