

Homes & Real estate

Originally published July 12, 2013 at 8:01 PM | Page modified July 13, 2013 at 10:28 AM

Cooking up safe, easy ways to grill green

We have so many grilling options these days — from food choices to the equipment and fuel that we use — that it's not always easy to figure out the greenest, safest and healthiest ways to grill. Here are some answers.

By Special to NWhomes

Grill, baby, grill! Outdoor cooking provides one of the joys of our short Seattle summer. Grilling can even be “green,” depending on how we do it.

We have so many grilling options these days — from food choices to the equipment and fuel that we use — that it's not always easy to figure out the greenest, safest and healthiest ways to grill.

Let's start with the eternal dispute over grilling with charcoal vs. gas. Grilling with propane or natural gas is cleaner and more energy efficient than using charcoal and has a much smaller environmental footprint, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Based on grilling performance and aesthetics, however, many purists opt for charcoal or even wood rather than gas. Most charcoal briquettes are made from sawdust and other waste wood. That's an eco-advantage, but they also may contain questionable chemical additives.

Lump charcoal, an increasingly available alternative, usually contains no additives and creates less ash. Look for brands of lump charcoal made from sustainably harvested wood or lumber mill waste.

Add wood chips to charcoal grills for flavor. You can also grill entirely with wood using a pellet grill, which works more like a smoker. While costlier than charcoal grills, pellet grills are more efficient. The small pellets used for cooking fuel look like rabbit food. They come from waste wood and contain no additives.

Use a chimney starter — a small steel cylinder that you place atop newspaper — to light charcoal. This creates less pollution than using lighter fluid or self-lighting charcoal.

As more of us live in close quarters in apartments or condos, complaints have increased about smoke from neighboring grills. This smoke can cause problems for people with asthma or other smoke sensitivities. Make sure your grill produces minimal smoke, and pay attention to where the smoke goes. When necessary, use a small fan to direct smoke away from neighbors' windows.

Like many American pursuits, grilling has turned into an excuse to buy stuff. Do you really need to get a new grill every two years, or have dozens of grilling tools and devices?

Invest in a durable, well-made grill by following recommendations from friends or online. For tools, a pair of sturdy tongs and a steel grill pan might be all the specialized equipment you need.

Clean your grill grate with a wad of used aluminum foil or half a lemon, or use a grill-cleaning block or stone. Avoid grill brushes, especially cheap ones. Metal bristles have come loose from

grill brushes, ending up in food and injuring people.

Burgers and steaks will always have a place at the grill, but reducing the amount of beef we cook improves our health, saves money and greatly reduces grilling's environmental impact. Livestock production worldwide results in more greenhouse gas emissions than transportation, according to a United Nations report.

We're in a golden age for grilling vegetables, considering all the produce available and the bounty of ideas and recipes on the Internet and elsewhere. Visit the more than 70 farmers markets in the Puget Sound area for a fresh selection of veggies. Our abundant local seafood also provides an excellent alternative for the grill.

When we grill outdoors we avoid heating up the kitchen, which conserves energy by reducing the need for fans or air conditioning. Another fun and even greener way to cook outside is with a solar oven.

Using an old box and aluminum foil, you can build your own solar oven by following simple online instructions. You can also buy a solar oven for \$50 —\$300.

As a good first solar oven cooking project, the Solar Cookers International Network recommends apples. Slice and layer cooking-type apples in your pot, add a little sugar and cinnamon, and solar-cook them for several hours. You'll end up with a delicious side dish somewhere between stewed apples and chunky applesauce.

Then it's back to the main dish on the grill. Whether it's a slab of meat or a grill pan full of veggies, it's the green and delicious taste of our fantastic Northwest summer.

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