



Screening the Heat



Find a **well-made screen** that fits your fireplace, suits your decor, and **keeps sparks at bay**

BY MARY FORSELL

On a chilly night, there's nothing more relaxing than a crackling fire, unless, of course, you're worrying about flying sparks burning holes in your carpet. A fire screen can prevent this from happening. And although a fire screen is designed to protect your home from damage, your biggest decision in selecting one is apt to be influenced more by style than by function. The fireplace is a room's focal point, so naturally the screen you put in front of it is going to significantly impact—perhaps even transform—the space. A well-chosen screen can create the right ambience, whatever your decorating style. Burnished metals add warmth or brightness, and frame details can lend rustic charm, romance, or elegant formality.

When it comes to keeping embers in their place, you have a number of choices. Most are variations on three basic types—spark guards, single-panel screens, and folding screens—and all are available in styles from colonial to contemporary. Prices are wide ranging, starting at about \$100 and climbing to \$2,000 for ready-made screens. (For more on types of screens and the degree of protection they offer, see the sidebar on the next page.)

A tight mesh stops sparks

Although not all screens protect equally, nearly all those made today will contain sparks adequately. Apart from safety and design, you'll also need to consider quality of materials and construction. The mesh should be rigid and dense enough to contain sparks. Openings of $\frac{1}{8}$ inch or smaller provide very good spark protection. Quarter-inch spaces could let some sparks through but still give adequate protection. Keep in mind that a tighter mesh will block more of your view of the flames.

Black steel is the most common mesh material, but tempered steel is better because it will not warp when exposed to the fire. For about \$100 more, a retailer can

SCREENS PROVIDE PROTECTIVE GOOD LOOKS *A screen sized for your fireplace protects floors and carpets while adding a decorative touch to your hearth.*

-sizing up your fireplace

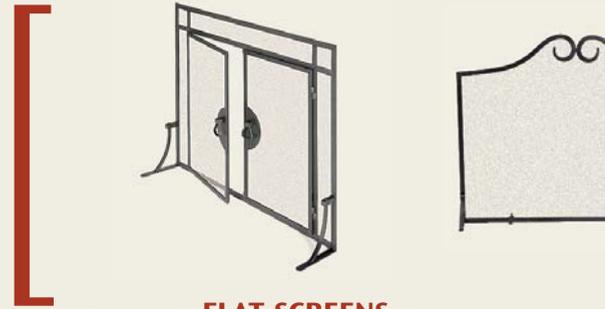
To make sure the screen you buy fits your fireplace, you'll need to measure the depth of the hearth (the noncombustible floor that extends in front of the fireplace) and the height and width of the fireplace opening. Be sure you measure the height from the hearth to the top of the opening; in some fireplaces, the floor of the firebox is raised several inches above the hearth.



SPARK GUARDS

Spark guards completely enclose the fireplace opening, giving full protection. Most are the traditional wrap-around or bubble design. A spark

guard is a good choice if you're on a budget but want top quality. Most have steel frames with steel mesh, often with brass accents.



FLAT SCREENS

A flat screen that leaves little or no gap between the hearth and the bottom of the screen can give almost full protection if it fits tight to the

CHOOSING A STYLE Sparks are less likely to fly past a screen that fits tight to the sides and top of your fireplace. Spark guards give the best protection, followed by flat screens, then folding screens.



custom-fit brass or copper mesh for you. Although attractive, these materials are more prone to warping and oxidizing.

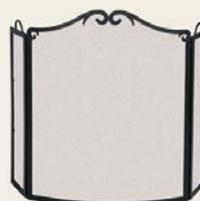
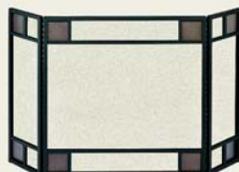
The frame material dictates the price

A basic spark guard in a stock size in black steel starts at about \$100, and folding steel screens begin at around \$150. Add a hammered look to the steel and the price climbs to \$300 to \$800 or higher, depending on the manufacturer.

If you like the look of brass, copper, nickel, or bronze but are on a budget, consider a plated finish over steel for \$300 to \$600. The downside is that the plating could get scratched or rub off. For about the same price you can get a fire screen that's powder coated. Powder coating is a paintlike finish that's durable, highly heat resistant, and available in lots of colors. Powder coating seems ideal for fire screens, but it can also hide potential weak spots such as poor welds or bubbled-up areas. By contrast, plating requires a pristine, polished under-surface, so any defects show. Avoid potential problems by getting a lifetime warranty, which is offered by many manufacturers.

Solid metal frames in brass, bronze, copper, and cast aluminum are also available. Prices begin at \$400 for brass and climb quickly, depending on the metal. Solid brass, bronze, and copper frames can be heavy. All of these materials are less resilient than steel, so their frames are wider. Tubular brass, another option, is about a third

A BOWED SCREEN FITS IRREGULAR SURFACES
The curved top of a bowed screen offers adequate protection from all but the most high-flying sparks.



FOLDING SCREENS

front of the fireplace. A variation on the flat screen is the bowed screen, which bulges out in the center, leaving a gap at the top.

Most folding screens offer good spark protection. Three-fold screens have a large central panel with two smaller side panels; four-fold screens gener-

ally have panels of equal size. Some are joined with piano hinges, which add reinforcement and close the small gap between panels.

the weight and half the price of solid brass. Ordering a custom size or adding a special decoration—finials or filigree—will increase the cost of a screen by about one third.

Uninspired by fireplace showroom choices? If you're willing to pay fine-art prices, you could commission an artist to make a screen. Expect to pay up to half of the cost at the outset, then wait months or even a year for the finished product. Far less expensive alternatives are vintage and antique screens, ranging from \$50 for wire mesh types on up to several hundred for Victorian curlicue wrought iron. Whatever the style, check first to be sure the handles and mesh are intact and that any moving parts operate smoothly. If you fall in love with an antique screen made of tapestry, wood, or mica, use it for decoration only. Save the roaring blaze for a metal screen, or your fire-screen find—and more—could go up in smoke. 

Mary Forsell is a freelance writer who lives in New York's Hudson Valley in a 1773 home with a hard-to-fit fireplace.

See Resources on page 90.



A BRASS-TRIMMED SPARK GUARD LETS THE FIRE SHOW THROUGH *Keep in mind that screens with less-dominant metal frames surrounding the wire mesh allow you to see more of the fire.*