

LOG HOME LIVING

Choosing the Best Home

By Roland Sweet

It goes without saying that the appeal of log homes is the

wood. Logs are beautiful, strong and durable. They're also renewable. For these reasons alone, many people regard logs as the quintessential building material.

There's more to log homes than the logs, however. What makes log homes truly special is the way the logs are shaped, fitted and assembled. Traditional log-building skills and contemporary engineering combine to make log homes the delight that they have become. Now wonder they are in such demand.



As you travel the path toward owning your own log home, you will encounter many new terms and concepts. That's because log homes are different from conventional homes. Take advantage of these differences to find a log home that works for you.

Start by choosing a look. Of all the choices that you will make, this is the one that should concern you the most. Once your home is bought and built, and you're living it in, the look will be the only thing that matters. So think long term and concentrate on what kind of log home will satisfy you the most for the next five, 10, possibly 30 or more years.

Although few log homes look alike, there are some general characteristics that appeal to their owners. Try to identify what these features are when you look at log homes, and save pictures of homes that have them.

Finding Ideas

Log-home magazines abound with pictures showing the many different styles of log homes, as well as how to decorate them. Clip ideas that appeal to you, even if they belong to a log home that doesn't — even if it isn't

a log home at all. When you're designing your kitchen, for example, a variety of kitchen design and decor books on the market will expose you to many ingenious space solutions.

You'll benefit from being able to spot features that will work best for you, even if they are minute details with a broader setting. Pick and choose ideas. Don't be distracted by the size of pictured homes. Magazines usually show large ones because they're easier to get a camera inside and more interesting to photograph. If you're planning a smaller place, look for cozy groupings within larger settings. Notice colors and furnishings that work well with wood. Almost any feature you like on a bigger home can be scaled down.

Looking through log-home magazines, you'll notice lots of advertisements for companies that sell log homes. Most of these ads offer brochures, catalogs, plans books or videos, priced anywhere from \$5 to \$25. This sales literature can help you build your arsenal of ideas by showing a variety of home styles and sizes. Before you find yourself drowning in mail and spending all the money you were saving for your stacked-stone fireplace on planning guides, however, narrow your choices to a few companies whose homes you like the look of.

Understanding the System

Today's [log homes](#), whether manufactured or handcrafted, are systems-built homes. That is, they are engineered to be assembled according to a calculated method that assures their structural stability. The wall logs are just one component of this system. There are also sealing and fastening components to hold the individual logs together so they function as a unit and to keep them weathertight. The building system also determines how the walls relate to the windows, doors and roof.

Each log-home company provides a detailed construction manual describing how its particular system should be assembled to ensure structural integrity. This manual is essential for do-it-yourselfers, contractors who have never built a log home and even experienced log-home builders because the homes they have built might have used a different system.

More important than which building system the log-home company you're interested in uses, is that this system should never be deviated from or compromised. Almost every complaint against a log home that results from a flaw in the building system can be traced to a builder who ignored or modified specific instructions in the log-home construction manual, either because he didn't understand it or thought he knew a better way.

Points addressed by these building systems are the fit of the logs, both horizontally and at their corners, and the methods of fastening the logs to each other and sealing the spaces between them. In assessing a building system, you needn't be overly concerned with these technical points. Each company believes that the system it has painstakingly developed is the best, but the fact that there are dozens of systems ought to suggest to you that no one way is the best. They all work.

Choosing Your Logs

Despite advice to research and plan your log home, when it comes to the actual logs, passion may be preferable to logic. Some technical aspects should concern you &mdash provisions for accommodating settlement is one. For the most part, though, decisions involving the species, size, shape and fit of the logs are matters of personal taste.

Basic shapes are round and flat. In-between is the D-style log, which is milled round on the outside and flat on the inside. These various shapes can be achieved by hand tools or by precision machinery. Certain log shapes are traditionally associated with different regions. The square log is common in the Appalachian Mountains. Out West, round logs rule. The advent of milled logs has brought greater variations; you can even buy a log that is machined to a clapboard look.

Log sizes, measured as diameter or height or thickness, vary from about 5 inches to nearly 2 feet. Most milled logs fall within the 6-inch to 10-inch range. Hand-peeled or hewn logs will likely start at 10 to 12 inches. Hand-peeled logs also will have some taper to them, so they might be 10 inches at the top and 15 inches at the bottom, or butt end. The taper is compensated for by alternating the tops and bottoms as the logs are stacked to fit the wall. Milled logs have a uniform, rhythmic appearance when they are stacked.

Stacking is the premise of log construction, which refers more to how a home is built than the material used. The wood is stacked horizontally. The point of refinement is how they are made to fit together when stacked.

Handcrafters often use the scribe-fit method, whereby a tool called a scribe, which looks like a compass, is guided along the contours of the lower log while it marks a matching line in the log above that the cutting tool follows. When the cutting is done, the two logs fit together perfectly. As the logs compress and settle, the fit should become even tighter.

Milled logs are able to achieve a tight fit because of precision cutting machinery. This equipment can produce logs with interlocking tongues and grooves, subtle drip edges to keep moisture from collecting between the logs, spline grooves and even special cuts to relieve stress.
