

Woodfuel, What Are the Options: Briquettes and Pellets

Briquettes

In the UK briquettes are made out of dry sawdust, which, when compressed uses the natural characteristics of the wood to bond fibres. They tend to be supplied in small 10-15kg bags and are around 200mm long.

They are often produced from wood, but they can be made from peat, straw, waste paper, rapeseed and even bio-digestant from Anaerobic Digestion plants.

The manufactured nature of a briquette gives them moisture content, optimally below 10%, often significantly lower than other woodfuels.



A briquette can be used in a similar way to logs, (in open fires, stoves, boilers). They tend to burn for longer and at a higher temperature than logs because of the higher energy content. Caution is needed when placing on open fires and smaller stoves as they tend to expand when hot.

Some forms may produce higher ash content; this entirely depends on the raw material used in production. Also be aware that if they get wet, they will disintegrate so dry internal storage is vital.

Pellets

Pellets are usually made from wood sawdust compressed into a small cylindrical shape. They are commonly about 6mm long, similar in appearance to chicken or horse feed pellets.

Whereas briquettes are used in a similar manner to logs, pellets are used in automatic systems. This makes size, moisture and density critical to the smooth operation of fuel feed systems. The consistent characteristics of pellets combined with no more than 0.7% ash content have led to pellet systems taking a large market share in the small to medium sized biomass market (up to 199 kWh) in recent years.



Depending on the size of the system, pellets are delivered in bulk by lorry and blown into a storage hopper with a fully-automated blown feed system. For smaller scale users pellets can be purchased in bags weighing around 10-20kgs and manually put into a storage system.

It is important to avoid poor quality pellets that fall apart easily and create dust and may create problems with the boiler system. Always choose pellets of a consistent length with a smooth finish and certified to EN- Plus standard.

To qualify for Renewable Heat Incentive your fuel supplier should be registered on the Biomass Fuel Supplier list. <http://biomass-suppliers-list.service.gov.uk/>

What to do with the Ash

Wood ash from biomass boilers is a great soil improver. When used sparingly on the garden or compost heap it is great for a little extra nourishment. As a rule of thumb add 1 cup of fine powdery wood ash for every 4.2 m³ of compost/organic potting mix.

It is particularly effective to aid tomato growth since they enjoy a slightly alkaline pH. Here's how: before planting, pour ¼ cup of wood ashes in the hole where you will plant the tomatoes and plant as normal. If you have already planted the tomatoes (without adding ash first), sprinkle ¼ cup of ashes around the base of each plant and gently work into the soil with a garden rake.

Do keep in mind that wood ashes raise the soil's level of alkalinity so avoid using wood ash around acid-loving plants, including: potatoes, hydrangeas, rhododendrons, azaleas, tulips, and junipers. Always rinse hands and gardening tools thoroughly after handling wood ashes.

Other compounds in wood ash are naturally repellent to slugs and snails, making ash a great tool for keeping your garden pest-free. This can be done by spreading ashes evenly around the edges of garden rows.