



ROB LICHT CUSTOM SAUNAS

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Using and maintaining your sauna with the Lämpimämpi wood fired stove

Getting the sauna ready- getting the wood and water, lighting the stove and tending the fire are as much a part of the sauna ritual as the actual sauna. It is a time to step away from the house, leave the electronic devices behind and slow down. While the sweat itself can be done in thirty minutes, you should give yourself over to the entire process for a few hours- hours that you lose track of as you revert to what we call "Sauna Time". Nothing can ruin a sauna more than having a guest who is on a tight schedule and constantly checking their watch.

Firewood:

When selecting wood to burn think "sticks", not logs. The sauna stove is meant to be fired fast and hot—old pine boards and scraps work great with a little bit of harder wood such as oak once the stove gets going. A short sauna will take only one arm load of wood. For longer saunas with more people coming and going plan on reloading as the fire goes down. Hardwood will keep a fire burning longer than softwood. The sticks should be about the diameter of your finger to start off, working up to the thickness of your arm- no big logs! If you are buying cordwood, ash is a good wood that splits easily and burns hot. If you burn wood in your house do not use the same logs for the sauna- make a dedicated pile of smaller, faster burning wood.

Firing the stove:

Unlike a household wood stoves which are meant to burn slowly and evenly over a period of several hours, a sauna stove is "fired" by bringing it to maximum temperature rapidly. The heat is transferred to the rocks, the thick steel plate on the stove and the water tank; water is then poured over the rocks to create the Löyly or sauna steam. Whereas a cast iron wood stove will crack or even explode if you pour water on it, welded steel can take the sudden shock. The Lämpimämpi stove is all welded steel- even the door, so it will never crack. Even the fire grate is steel, which outlast iron.



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Before you start, make sure that the damper control (in the sauna room on the stove pipe) is in the fully open position. The axis of the handle should be vertical. If your stove has the water tank you will want to fill it before the stove gets really hot. Usually I light the fire and then fill the tank so I can make sure it gets going. Empty the ash drawer if it is full. Clean out the grate so that air flows up through it.

Start with several sheets of DRY newspaper- avoid those glossy ad pages heavy with ink. Wad them up tightly and place them directly on the grate. Next place the smallest sticks— about the thickness of your fingers —on the newspaper. Continue stacking up the wood – criss-crossing it to leave spaces for the fire to breathe—with the sticks getting larger as you go. Get as much wood as you can in the stove- still leaving room for the fire to circulate. Next light it from the bottom and close the door leaving the air holes open fully. On particularly damp or down-drafty days it helps to light a wad of newspaper and shove it up into the top of the stove just prior to lighting the paper underneath the fire— this heats up the stove pipe and gets the draft going. For the first ten minutes you should open the ash drawer a few inches to help increase the draw of the fire. Now is a good time to fill the buckets, get the towels in order, make sure the window is shut tight, etc.

Once the fire is really going (after about ten minutes) you should close the ash drawer and leave the damper control and the air holes in the door fully open. You may want to add a few more sticks now. Once you are confident of your fire-building skills you should be able to walk away at this point and come back in 30 minutes to a hot sauna. Experience will tell you if need to close it down a little bit or leave it fully open. Check the stove pipe inside the sauna to make sure it's not firing too hot: it should be a lot hotter than your typical wood stove —but don't let the stove pipe get red hot. To close it down close either or the air control on the door or the damper on the stove pipe or both. The type of wood and the wind and weather outside will affect the firing. For the first few saunas I recommend just hanging out in the dressing room while things heat up. I typically get the stove so hot the steel glows red beneath the rocks.! The stove is made to take this heat, with 3/8" plate on the top area. Other stoves will collapse over time at this temperature.

Water tank:

If you have a water tank attached to the stove, fill it before the stove gets hot. It is OK to fire the stove when the bottom of the water tank frozen—just fill it with water to help it thaw. This water will be used for bathing (mixing it with cold water) and it also holds heat and adds moisture to the room. The gentle bubbling of the tank will let



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you know it is boiling hot . For a drier sauna, fire the sauna with no water in the tank. You can easily remove the tank if needed. For a steamier sauna, leave the tank lid off and even add essential oil to the water. In freezing weather always drain the water tank when done . A little ice in the bottom is ok.

Taking the sauna:

If you are expecting a lot of people, let the rocks get really hot before getting in the sauna. You'll want this reserve of heat to maintain the temperature as people come and go. Think of the people as the ice cubes in a drink—the bodies are actually absorbing the heat and taking it away. The water tank also acts as a heat reserve.

If your sauna has electricity, The light below the bench should provide adequate lighting- it is on a dimmer switch. Never bring candles into the sauna- even an unlit candle will melt forming a messy pool of wax.!

Normally the sauna is fairly dry but not uncomfortably so. The high point of the sauna is the löyly- pouring water over the rocks to make steam. The burst of steam may send some people running out, but seasoned sauna users will relish this moment. Start with a ladle—or *kipper*—full and go from there. Be careful of the hot steam hitting your hand as you pour. You can add essential oils to the löyly water (or the water tank) for a therapeutic effect—but don't put them straight up on the hot rocks- they will burn and smoke.

How hot is hot enough? 160-180° Fahrenheit is a good starting point, 220° is pretty darn hot and some go even hotter. Usually the sauna is done in rounds—two, three or more ten to twenty minute sessions with a cool down in between. Be sure to drink plenty of fluids in between. Listen to your body and don't overdo it!



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Bathing

If you have the water tank, the last phase is washing up. Mix a bucketful of the hot water with some cold (careful—it may be scalding and the valve will be hot.) and really scrub yourself clean as you sit on the lowest bench or bathing stool. You will never feel cleaner because your pores are fully open when you are hot. If you are lucky enough to have a birch tree nearby you can make a *vitah* from the branches and gently thrash yourself with them to really stimulate your skin. You can rinse off with a bucketful of warm or cool water in the sauna or outside.

Cleanup:

Since the sauna is really a bath house, it is important to keep it clean. After every sauna you should scrub and rinse off the benches with water, open the windows and door to let it air out hang up all the towels and leave the buckets to drain. Every couple of saunas you should sweep out the sauna, rinse out the water tank and clean out the floor drain (the cover lifts off). Some benches may lift out for easier cleaning.

Yearly maintenance:

With the exception of the floor and thresholds, none of the surfaces are treated. I recommend yearly cleaning of the wood with mild soap and warm water, and a light sanding —but in no case should you use any chemicals. The stove, except for the stainless steel heat shield and rock basket, is untreated and will rust—but is so thick it will not matter. It would be ok to put stove polish on the front of the stove but keep any toxins out of the sauna room. The interior stove pipe may need replacing in about 5 years- be sure to burn off the paint before using the sauna- it is highly toxic. The stove pipe should be cleaned annually - be sure to use a nylon stove brush as stated in the instructions provided with the triple-wall pipe. You can easily do this from inside the sauna by taking the pipe sections apart. Generally, creosote build-up will not be a problem if you fire the stove hot enough and use dry wood. The water tank may build up a layer of minerals or iron oxide- especially if you use well or creek water. This is normal and does not affect it.