

GRILLS BUYING TIPS

Grilling season has officially begun, and if you need a new grill (or some new grill tools), David Gregg, BehindThe Buy.com (www.behindthebuy.com) senior editor, had some shopping advice on The Early Show on Monday, May 25, 2009. He explained what to look for when buying a charcoal or gas grill, and also showed an infrared grill and an electric grill. He finished with a handful of brand new grilling gizmos and gadgets:

Charcoal vs Gas

Although many people consider charcoal the classic grilling method, more Americans now own gas grills. Both come with pluses and minuses - charcoal grilling takes more time; gas burns cleaner than charcoal; charcoal has that distinct smokey taste - you just have to decide what's important to you. The good news is that you don't have to spend a lot of money to own a quality grill. Consumer Reports extensively tested grills and found that some costing as little as \$200 outperformed those costing hundreds more. Here are the features you should consider when shopping for each:

CHARCOAL

* **KETTLE SHAPE:** A kettle shaped charcoal grill with a lid and vents top and bottom is worth the extra dollars. A good one will last for years and years while a low-end, charcoal grill typically holds up for a season or perhaps two. The kettle shape on the better grills allows the heat to circulate under the coals. This makes it easier to start and maintain a fire and also produces a circulation that smokes the food with charcoal flavor. The domed lid allows smoke to envelope the food and both cook and flavor the grilled items.

* **VENTS:** Vents on the bottom and top help regulate the fire, heat, and smoke. When the grill is heating low, open the bottom vents and let the air feed the coals. If fat dripping from the meat causes flares and high levels of heat, close the bottom and top vents. This puts an immediate damper on the flames and cuts the heat levels back. Vents allow for excellent regulation of the fire and the temperature. Be sure to look for vents both on the lid and the base.

* **ASH PAN:** Another feature worth considering when buying a charcoal grill is the ash pan. This is located under the grill base and catches any coals dropped during venting. When bottom vents are opened, it's common for small pieces of charcoal to drop down. The pan can also be used to catch ashes when cleaning the grill. An ash pan is both a safety and convenience feature.

Gas

* **COOKING SYSTEM:** Better grills generally have two or more separate burners (not just control knobs) which allow greater control of heat. Most lower-priced grills have only one burner shaped like an H or a bar, some with one control, some with two controls. Grills with one burner don't allow you to control heat as well as grills with multiple burners and may result in hot and cold spots on the cooking surface.

* **BTUs:** BTUs are not a measure of cooking power. They indicate the volume of gas a grill can burn. Tightly engineered grills use fewer BTUs and cook food more efficiently. Sometimes less is more. Too many BTUs can cause damage to burners and reduce the life of the grill. In general, large grills with large cooking surfaces require higher BTUs.

* **SOLID CONSTRUCTION:** A good, well-built grill will feel solid and sturdy; a poorly made grill will wiggle. If a grill isn't solid on the sales floor, chances are it will fall apart rather quickly on the patio or deck. Choose a grill made of high grade U.S. steel. Also opt for a baked-on, porcelain-enamel finish. The cart should be sturdy, wheels should roll easily, and the grill should display a good fit and finish.

Cooking grates are generally made from heavy-duty plated steel or chrome-plated aluminum. A thicker, heavier-gauge cooking grate will last longer and distribute and retain heat better. Grates coated with porcelain enamel are a common step-up feature. The best grates are made of cast iron, stainless steel, or porcelain-coated aluminum or cast iron.

Other options

There are two other types of grills you may want to consider.

INFRARED

Infrared grills run on propane, just like other gas grills, but the burners are topped with glass, ceramic or metal tiles that distribute the heat through thousands of microscopic holes, creating a cooking surface that's hot beyond belief - about three times hotter than the traditional barbecue. Grills featuring infrared heat used to be prohibitively expensive, but prices have really come down in the past couple of years. The grill we have on set, made by Char-broil, is \$400. Fans say that the intense heat sears meat the way steakhouse chefs do, sealing in the juicy goodness. It's important to note that many of these grills come with warranties good for only two years; more traditional grills come with five to ten year warranties.

ELECTRIC

If you only have small balcony, or live in an apartment where grills are not allowed, you may want to consider an electric grill. The newer models are much improved, but critics say they fail to replicate a true grilled flavor.

Not everyone is in the market for a new grill, but who can resist new grill toys?! Below is a list of what we'll have on set:

GasWatch Propane-Level Indicator and Safety Gauge \$19.99

This lets you know when your gas tank is running low (would hate for your grill to run out of juice in the middle of a party!). It also features an emergency flow limiter in the event of a major leak and leak detection that protects the environment from gas emissions.

www.amazon.com

Frontgate's Digital Cooking Thermometer \$34.50

This thermometer is the easiest way to know exactly when beef, poultry, lamb, or pork is done to your preference. Just choose the type of meat you're cooking and how well-cooked you want it to be; a color-changing indicator will display blue for rare, yellow for medium rare, amber for medium, and red for well done.

www.frontgate.com

Fire Wire Stainless Steel Flexible Grilling Skewer \$14.99

This skewer is flexible meaning it can fit anywhere on the grill, and the ends stay cool making the skewers easier to turn and remove from the grill.

www.amazon.com

Outset Magnetic Light for Barbeque Tools \$15

This miniature flashlight features a strong magnetic base that attaches to most BBQ tools. The light swivels in any direction for full range of motion. Maximum brightness is provided by three LED bulbs... you'll never have to guess when it's time to flip the burgers again.

www.cooking.com

Grillfloss \$19.97

Like dental floss, Grillfloss cleans where traditional brushes can't, the underside of the grill grates. Easily scrape off that left-over grilling gunk so your grill is all ready to go the next time you're hungry for dinner.

www.grillfloss.com