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*Cristina Santiestevan*

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We Americans are passionate about our grilling. According to the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, eight in ten households own at least one grill, and three-quarters of us prefer grilling to cooking indoors. In fact, more than half of us enjoy our grills so much that we grill year-round, through summer heat and winter weather. On the Fourth of July – the most popular day for a BBQ – more than 60 million American households will fire up a grill.

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Add some green to your red, white and blue this year by choosing the most healthy and efficient fuel for your grill.

Battles rage between die-hard charcoal fans and lovers of push-button gas grill convenience. Some can't imagine a burger without the smoky flavor of charcoal, while others wince at the thought of lighting, tending and coaxing coals for never-ending minutes before the food can be cooked. Increasingly, these debates are expanding beyond taste and convenience to include the environment. Which is better, gas or charcoal?

When comparing carbon emissions, gas-powered grills win without a fight. Tristram West, a researcher with the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory, compared the carbon output of gas, charcoal and electric powered grills when producing 35,000 Btu's per hour, a typical industry standard. West's calculations showed that gas produced 5.6 pounds of carbon dioxide each hour, compared to 11 pounds for charcoal. Electrical grills produce a whopping 15 pounds of carbon dioxide for every hour at 35,000 Btu's.

Most gas grills run on propane. However, a growing number rely on natural gas, which is widely believed to be the most efficient and cleanest burning gas available. Any gas grill can be hooked up to a natural gas line, although your house needs a natural gas hookup for this to work and the initial set-up is best handled by a trained professional. Regulations vary by state - check with your gas company or a local plumber. If you think this sounds like too much work, just imagine the benefits: No more running out of propane five minutes into cooking your dinner!

Some argue that charcoal is a better choice, despite it's greater carbon production, because it is a renewable resource. However, almost all of the name brand charcoal briquettes are made by combining waste wood and sawdust with coal dust and other additives, none of which you want in your air or on your food. In addition to producing twice the carbon dioxide, these briquettes emit significantly more carbon monoxide, soot and particulate pollution. Lighter fluid and self-lighting briquettes make the situation worse by adding volatile organic compounds (VOCs) to the mix.

Still determined to use charcoal? Try lump charcoal, which is made from actual trees and is not augmented with coal, fuel or other additives. Look for products that bear the Rainforest Alliance's SmartWood logo or make their charcoal from well-managed forests or invasive tree species, such as Whole Foods or Lokkii. No matter where you buy your lump charcoal, skip the lighter fluid. Instead, use a simple grill chimney to get your coals going.

Want the best of both worlds? Choose a gas grill (natural gas if possible), and use a smoker box with a handful of wood chips to get that authentic barbeque flavor.

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