

Outdoor Brick Fireplace Repair: Building and Maintaining Them for Texas Weather

Heat Inside, Rain Outside — A Texas Mason's Guide to
Fireplaces, Fireboxes, and Outdoor Kitchens

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Chapter 1: Why Outdoor Brick Fireplace Repair Is Its Own Trade

I've spent fifty years laying and repairing brick in Texas, and I'll tell you something that took me a long time to learn: an outdoor brick fireplace is the hardest-working piece of masonry on any property. Think about what it endures. Inside the firebox, you're building fires that hit temperatures most building materials were never designed to see. Six inches away, on the outside face, the same structure is getting rained on, sun-baked, and in a North Texas January, frozen solid. Heat inside, weather outside, all day, every day. No other brickwork on your property lives a life that hard — not your house walls, not your chimney, not your garden wall.

That split personality is why outdoor brick fireplace repair is its own discipline. A mason who can repoint your house walls beautifully might get an outdoor fireplace wrong, because a fireplace fails in different ways than a wall does. The wall fails from water and movement. The fireplace fails from water and movement AND from fire — thermal expansion, direct flame contact, and the kind of rapid heating and

cooling that turns the wrong mortar to dust in a few seasons.

I've repaired hundreds of these across DFW and central Texas. The pattern is always the same. Somebody builds an outdoor fireplace — sometimes a good one, sometimes a cheap one — and for five or ten years it looks fine. Then the mortar joints start crumbling. Then the firebox walls start shedding chunks. Then the crown cracks, water gets behind the brick, and one day the homeowner looks up and sees a lean, or a bulge, or a gap where the whole chimney stack has shifted. What was a repair job is now a rebuild job. The difference between those two outcomes, nine times out of ten, is whether the original builder and the homeowner understood that this structure has two enemies fighting it at once.

So that's what this book is. We're going to walk through every part of an outdoor brick fireplace — the firebox, the crown, the joints, the cap, the flue — plus the brick outdoor kitchen, which is the natural cousin of the outdoor fireplace and fails in the same ways. I'll tell you how each part should be built, how each part fails, what outdoor brick fireplace repair costs in 2026, and how to keep from needing me at all. That's my goal with these books: teach you enough that you only hire a

mason when you actually need one.

Chapter 2: The Firebox — Where the Fire Actually Lives

Let's start inside, where the trouble starts. The firebox is the chamber that holds the fire — the floor, walls, and back of the burn area. In a masonry outdoor fireplace, it should be built from firebrick — those dense, pale yellow bricks you see inside any real fireplace — laid with refractory mortar. Firebrick and refractory mortar are rated to handle continuous high heat. Regular brick and regular Type N mortar are not.

Here's the failure I see more than any other: a beautiful outdoor fireplace, gorgeous brick on the outside, and somebody — the original builder, a handyman, a "contractor" — built the firebox out of ordinary face brick with ordinary mortar. Or they lined it with firebrick but stuck the bricks in with regular mortar, which crumbles the first time the fire really gets going. For the first couple of seasons it looks fine. Then the homeowner calls me because chunks of brick are falling off the firebox walls and the mortar joints look like sand.

When I open one of these up, the diagnosis is always the same: the materials couldn't take the heat. Outdoor firebox repair on a job like this means tearing out everything that was laid wrong and rebuilding the firebox correctly — firebrick, refractory mortar, proper clearances. It's labor-intensive because you're working inside a confined space, cutting out the old material brick by brick.

The 2026 numbers for outdoor firebox repair: national contractor data puts firebox repair or replacement between \$100 and \$2,500, with the actual range driven by material and damage. A straightforward firebox replacement on a standard fireplace runs \$160 to \$750, averaging around \$455. Installing a firebox in a full masonry fireplace averages about \$1,300. But I want to be honest with you about what those numbers mean for an OUTDOOR fireplace in Texas: outdoor jobs trend toward the upper part of the ranges because of access, weather delays, and the fact that outdoor fireboxes take more abuse and often need more extensive rebuilds than the indoor numbers assume. A full firebox rebuild on an outdoor brick fireplace in DFW typically runs in the range of \$1,500 to \$3,500 depending on size and how much of the surrounding structure has to come apart to get at it.

How do you know your firebox is failing? Look for these signs: mortar joints inside the burn chamber that you can scrape out with your finger; firebrick faces that are flaking, spalling, or falling out; visible gaps between firebricks; and any sign that the fire has burned through to the outer brick shell. That last one is the urgent one — if flame is reaching your structural brick, you've got a fire risk, not just a maintenance issue.

One more thing about fireboxes: the size matters more than people think. A firebox that's too shallow or too tall throws heat and smoke everywhere except at the people sitting around it. If you're having a fireplace built new, the firebox proportions are the single most important design decision. A good mason knows the ratios. A bad one builds whatever fits the space and leaves you with a fireplace that smokes out the whole patio.

Chapter 3: The Crown — The Umbrella Over Everything

If the firebox is the heart of the fireplace, the crown is the umbrella. The crown is the concrete or mortar cap that covers the top of the chimney — the slab that sits over the brick courses and sheds water away from the structure. Everything below the crown is brick; the crown is what keeps the rain from getting down into the brick.

A properly built crown is a poured concrete slab, at least two inches thick at its thinnest point, sloping away from the flue so water runs off. It should overhang the brick below by an inch or two all the way around — that's the drip edge, and it's what keeps water from running down the face of the chimney. The flue liner should pass through the crown with an expansion joint around it — a flexible seal — because the flue gets hot and expands, and a rigid connection there will crack the crown every time.

Now let me tell you how most outdoor fireplace crowns actually get built, especially on the cheaper jobs. Instead of a poured, sloped, overhanging slab, the builder trowels a skim

of mortar across the top of the last course of brick and calls it a crown. It's maybe half an inch thick, flat as a pancake, flush with the brick below. No slope. No overhang. No expansion joint around the flue. That skim coat lasts a few seasons, then it cracks — usually right around the flue first, because the flue expands against it — and from there the water has a direct path down into the top courses of the chimney.

Water inside a chimney is how a \$400 repair becomes a \$3,000 repair. It saturates the brick, freezes in winter, and starts popping brick faces and blowing out joints from the top down. I've taken apart chimneys where the top four or five courses of brick were mush — you could crumble them by hand — while the courses below were perfectly sound. The damage always starts at the crown.

The 2026 numbers: minor crown repair — sealing cracks, patching — runs \$150 to \$350. A full crown replacement, poured properly with slope and overhang, runs up to \$3,000 depending on size and access. A crown wash or elastomeric crown coating — the products that seal and flex over a cracked crown — runs in the low hundreds and is a legitimate fix when the crown is structurally sound but weathered. It's not a substitute for a crown that has heaved,

shifted, or broken into pieces, and any contractor who tells you a coating fixes a structural failure is selling you a bucket of paint.

When you hire an outdoor fireplace mason, ask to see his crown detail before he starts. Ask: how thick, what slope, how much overhang, how does the flue pass through. If he looks confused, you're talking to the wrong man.

Chapter 4: Mortar Joints and Brick Faces — What Weather Does to the Outside

Now the outside of the structure — the part that takes the rain, the sun, and the Texas temperature swings. Outdoor masonry fails from the outside in, and it fails in predictable ways.

First, the mortar joints. On an outdoor brick fireplace, the joints take direct rain, and rain dissolves mortar over time — especially the cheap, high-lime mixes some builders use. Add freeze-thaw in North Texas winters — water gets into the joint, freezes, expands, and pushes the joint apart from inside — and you get the crumbling, powdery joints I see on half the outdoor fireplaces in DFW. Repointing an outdoor fireplace runs the same as any repointing work, but it tends to be a bigger job than homeowners expect, because the joints fail more uniformly than on a house wall: every joint on the structure has lived the same hard life. If you're pricing a full repoint on an outdoor fireplace and chimney structure, you're typically looking at \$500 to \$2,500 for the mortar work alone, with height and access driving the number the same

way they do on any masonry repair.

Second, the brick faces. Spalling — where the face of the brick pops off in flakes or chunks — is the signature failure of Texas outdoor brickwork. It happens when the brick absorbs water and that water freezes, or when the brick absorbs water and salts crystallize inside it, or when hard modern mortar is used against softer brick and the brick becomes the sacrificial material. On an outdoor fireplace, the top courses and the faces that get the most direct rain are the first to go. Spalled brick can't be patched; the damaged units have to be cut out and replaced. Individual brick replacement runs \$350 to \$1,000 for a chimney-sized area, and it scales with how much brick needs swapping.

Third, the whole structure can move. This is the Texas special. Our expansive clay soil — the black gumbo that DFW sits on — swells when it's wet and shrinks when it's dry, and it moves foundations with it. Outdoor fireplaces are heavy, and a lot of them were built on inadequate footings: a shallow slab, or worse, just a thickened patio pour. When the soil moves, the fireplace moves, and a masonry structure that's moving is a structure that's cracking. The classic signs: a lean you can see from across the yard, a horizontal crack at

the base where the fireplace meets the patio, or a stair-step crack running up the side. If your outdoor fireplace is leaning or the base has separated, that's not a repointing job — that's a structural problem, and it needs a mason who understands footings before it needs anything else.

A word about waterproofing sealant, since every homeowner asks: a breathable masonry water repellent — silane or siloxane based — applied to the OUTSIDE of a sound brick structure is a good thing. It keeps rain out of the brick while letting trapped moisture escape. It runs \$150 to \$500 applied. What you do NOT want is a film-forming sealer or anything that traps moisture inside the wall. And you never waterproof your way out of a structural failure — sealing a cracked crown or a leaning chimney just hides the problem while it gets worse underneath.

Chapter 5: Caps, Spark Arrestors, and the Flue

The top of the fireplace has three parts working together: the crown (covered that), the cap, and the flue. The cap — also called a chimney cap — is the metal or masonry cover that sits over the flue opening. It keeps rain out of the flue, keeps animals and birds from nesting in it, and with a spark arrestor screen, it keeps embers from landing on your roof or your neighbor's.

Cap replacement averages around \$300 for a standard metal cap. That's one of the cheapest meaningful repairs on the whole structure, and it's the one people skip the most. An uncapped flue on an outdoor fireplace is an open pipe straight down into the firebox and smoke chamber. Every rainstorm sends water down it. I've seen fireboxes and smoke chambers destroyed from the inside out — not by fire, but by years of rain running down an uncapped flue, saturating everything, growing mold and algae, and corroding dampers and hardware. A \$300 cap prevents thousands in damage. If your outdoor fireplace has no cap, stop reading and get one.

The flue itself — the passage that carries smoke up and out — deserves attention too. On outdoor fireplaces, the flue liner is often clay tile, and clay tile cracks. It cracks from thermal shock (a big hot fire after a cold night), from chimney fires if creosote was allowed to build up, and from the general abuse of outdoor life. A cracked flue liner is a safety issue: heat and embers can reach the surrounding structure through the cracks. Flue repair runs \$600 to \$1,300 on average, and full relining — replacing the liner with a new system — runs \$1,500 to \$5,000 depending on the type and size. On an outdoor fireplace, if the flue liner is cracked in multiple places, replacement is usually the honest recommendation rather than patching.

One Texas-specific note: we get real wind. A properly sized cap with a spark arrestor isn't just about rain and critters — in a windy March with burn bans in effect half the county, embers from an outdoor fireplace are a liability issue. Make sure the arrestor screen is intact. It's a \$50 part that prevents a five-figure problem.

Chapter 6: The Brick Outdoor Kitchen — Masonry That Cooks

The brick outdoor kitchen is the outdoor fireplace's younger sibling, and it's booming in Texas. Grill islands, pizza oven enclosures, full cooking stations with sinks and bars — if it's got masonry in it, it lives by the same rules as everything else in this book.

Let me start with the money, because outdoor kitchens have the widest cost spread of any masonry project I price. Nationally, a basic masonry grill island starts around \$4,800 to \$9,400, and a full cooking station runs \$10,200 to \$18,800. But those numbers are appliance-light. In the DFW market, what I'm seeing in 2026: an entry-level masonry outdoor kitchen — island, built-in grill, countertop — runs \$8,000 to \$15,000. A mid-range build with a sink, side burner, and better appliances runs \$15,000 to \$35,000. A premium custom build with refrigeration, bar seating, and a fireplace can reach \$35,000 to \$75,000 and beyond. The masonry structure itself — the block core with brick or stone facing — runs \$150 to \$350 per linear foot, and countertops run \$60 to \$200 per

square foot depending on material.

And then there's the part everybody underestimates: the utilities and the foundation. Running a gas line out to the island costs \$500 to \$2,500. Electrical circuits with proper outdoor-rated protection run \$600 to \$2,500. Plumbing for a sink, with drainage, adds more. Budget 20 to 30 percent on top of the quoted masonry price for permits, utilities, gas, electrical, and site prep — that's not markup, that's the real cost of the licensed trades Texas requires for gas, electrical, and plumbing work.

The foundation is the make-or-break item on a brick outdoor kitchen, and it's where DFW's clay soil comes back into the picture. A masonry kitchen is heavy — thousands of pounds of block, brick, and countertop. It needs an engineered concrete foundation, and in DFW that runs \$1,000 to \$5,000 or more depending on the soil conditions and the size of the structure. This is non-negotiable. I've been called out to outdoor kitchens that were built on a standard patio slab, and within a year or two they're cracking at every corner, the countertops are separating from the island, and the whole thing is settling unevenly. The cheapest bid on an outdoor kitchen is almost always the one that skipped the footing. You

will pay for the footing one way or another — up front, in the honest bid, or later, in the repair.

The masonry details that matter on a kitchen: waterproof the island structure before the veneer goes on — the block core takes rain, and if water gets trapped behind the brick facing with no way out, you get efflorescence, spalling, and veneer failure. Use weep holes or drainage at the base. Slope the countertops slightly so water runs off instead of pooling against the structure. And if there's a pizza oven or any wood-fired appliance, it follows every firebox rule in Chapter 2 — firebrick, refractory mortar, proper clearances — plus a properly built chimney if it's enclosed.

One more thing: permits. Every DFW city I'm aware of requires permits for outdoor kitchens with masonry, electrical, gas, or plumbing. Any contractor who tells you otherwise on an outdoor kitchen is a red flag. The permit is cheap insurance that the gas line and the electrical were done by licensed people and inspected.

Chapter 7: Building It Right the First Time — The Spec Sheet

If you're having an outdoor brick fireplace or brick outdoor kitchen built new, this chapter is the whole book in one page. Hand this thinking to your mason and see how he reacts.

Footing. Engineered for the soil, below the frost line where applicable, sized for the full weight of the structure. In DFW clay, this means a real reinforced concrete footing, not a thickened patio edge. Ask your mason what the footing design is. If he says "we'll just pour it thick," keep looking.

Firebox. Firebrick laid in refractory mortar. Correct proportions for the opening size — the firebox depth should be roughly two-thirds the width of the opening for a traditional fireplace. Proper clearance from combustibles per code. A damper that actually operates.

Smoke chamber and flue. Smooth the smoke chamber — parging the interior to reduce turbulence and creosote buildup runs \$1,000 to \$2,000 and is worth it on a wood-burning unit. Clay tile or stainless flue liner, sized to the firebox, with an expansion joint where it meets the crown.

Crown. Poured concrete, minimum two inches thick at the thinnest point, sloped away from the flue, overhanging the brick by an inch or two all around. Expansion joint around the flue liner. Not a mortar skim coat. Ever.

Cap. A real chimney cap with spark arrestor, sized to the flue. This is a few hundred dollars on a multi-thousand-dollar structure. There is no excuse for skipping it.

Brick and mortar on the exterior. Brick rated for exterior use. Mortar matched to the brick — not harder than the brick. Joints tooled properly, not smeared. Weep provision at the base where the structure meets the footing or patio, so trapped moisture has a way out.

Waterproofing. A breathable silane/siloxane water repellent on the exterior brick after the mortar has cured — not a film-forming sealer.

For kitchens: engineered foundation, waterproofed island core, drainage at the base, sloped countertops, licensed trades for gas/electrical/plumbing, and permits pulled.

Ask your mason for all of this by name. A good one will nod along and probably add items. A bad one will tell you it's overkill. The bad one is telling you how he builds.

Chapter 8: Texas Weather Is the Real

Contractor Here

Everything in this book so far has been about construction and repair, but I need to give Texas weather its own chapter, because the weather is the force your fireplace is really negotiating with, and it doesn't negotiate fairly.

Start with the temperature swing. A North Texas winter can put a January night at 20 degrees and a July afternoon at 105. That's an 85-degree seasonal swing, but the daily swing is worse for masonry: a brick face that hits 140 degrees in direct afternoon sun can drop to 80 overnight. Every one of those cycles is the brick and mortar expanding and contracting at slightly different rates, working every joint, every bond, every connection a fraction of a fraction of an inch. Over a decade, those fractions add up to real movement. This is why outdoor mortar joints fail more uniformly and earlier than the same joints on a shaded house wall — the fireplace has no shade, no eaves, no protection. It takes the full cycle, every day, for its whole life.

Then the rain. Texas rain doesn't arrive politely. It comes

sideways in a spring thunderstorm, driven by 60-mile-an-hour wind, hammering the windward face of the chimney while the lee side stays dry. That uneven wetting is what produces uneven deterioration — I've walked up to fireplaces where one face needs a full repoint and the opposite face is fine. It also means your inspection has to look at all four sides, not just the side facing the patio. The ugly side is always the weather side.

Hail is the third partner. DFW gets real hail, and a serious hailstorm will chip and pit brick faces and can crack a marginal crown. After a big hail event, walk your fireplace the same way you'd walk your roof. Look for fresh chips on the brick, new cracks in the crown, and damage to the cap. If your roof got hit hard enough for an insurance claim, your outdoor fireplace took the same hits.

And then there's the drought half of the Texas year. People think of rain as the enemy of masonry, and it is, but drought does its damage through the soil. When the black clay dries out in August, it shrinks — and it shrinks unevenly, pulling away from footings and foundations. That summer shrinkage is when most of the settling movement happens. Then the fall rains swell the clay back up, sometimes lifting what settled.

This shrink-swell cycle is the engine behind leaning fireplaces and separated bases. If your fireplace has a lean, ask yourself when you first noticed it: odds are it was late summer, when the soil was at its driest and the structure was sitting at its lowest point.

The practical upshot: maintain consistent soil moisture around the footing of a heavy outdoor structure the same way foundation companies tell you to do around your house. In a dry August, that might mean running a soaker hose around the base of the fireplace. It sounds strange — watering your fireplace — but you're not watering the fireplace, you're watering the clay it's standing on. A footing that doesn't move is a structure that doesn't crack.

Chapter 9: Wood-Burning Versus Gas — The Honest Trade-Offs

About half the outdoor fireplaces I'm called to are wood-burning and half are gas, and the choice changes what the masonry goes through.

A wood-burning outdoor fireplace is the full experience — real fire, real heat, real smoke. It's also the full maintenance load. Wood fires produce creosote, the tarry residue that coats the smoke chamber and flue. Creosote is fuel for chimney fires, and outdoor fireplaces get swept less often than indoor ones because people think "it's outside, it doesn't matter." It matters. A chimney fire in an outdoor fireplace with a cracked flue liner can spread to the structure itself. If you burn wood, have the flue inspected and swept annually, burn seasoned hardwood, and never burn construction lumber, painted wood, or trash — the chemicals in treated and painted wood attack the flue liner and the mortar, and the creosote from green wood builds up fast.

Wood fires also hit the firebox with higher, more uneven heat than gas — thermal shock when a big fire catches on a cold

firebox is what cracks flue tiles and spalls firebrick faces. Warm the firebox up gradually on the first burn of a cold night; don't go straight to a bonfire.

Gas is the low-maintenance option. A gas log set or gas burner in an outdoor fireplace produces steady, even heat with no creosote, no sparks, and no ash. The firebox lasts longer because the heat is consistent. The trade-off is what gas doesn't give you: the radiant heat and the experience of a real wood fire are diminished, and you're paying for gas. There's also a maintenance item people miss on gas units: the burner and log set need annual service, and the gas line connection needs to be checked for leaks. A gas fireplace that hasn't been serviced in five years is a quiet hazard.

From a pure masonry standpoint, gas is easier on the structure — every time. Less thermal shock, less creosote, fewer chimney fires, longer firebox life. If you're building new and the question is wood or gas, the honest answer is: wood for the experience, gas for the masonry's longevity and your maintenance budget. Plenty of my customers build wood-burning with a gas starter — the best of both, and the gas starter takes the thermal shock out of cold starts.

One safety note that applies to both: burn bans. Half the

counties in Texas are under some form of burn restriction for half the year. An outdoor wood-burning fireplace is an open fire, and during a burn ban it's treated like one. Know your county's rules before you build, or you may own a beautiful fireplace you're legally not allowed to light from June to October.

Chapter 10: The Annual Inspection — Twenty Minutes That Save Thousands

Every catastrophic outdoor fireplace failure I've repaired started as a small problem nobody looked at for three years. Here's the inspection I want every owner to do once a year — late fall, before the burning season. It takes twenty minutes, a ladder, and a flashlight. No special skills.

From the ground, all four sides. Walk a full circle. Look for: any lean or tilt, even a slight one; stair-step cracks in the mortar joints; bulging courses where the brick has pushed outward; spalled or flaking brick faces; white powdery staining (efflorescence — water is moving through the masonry); dark staining below the crown (water is getting behind the brick). Sight along the edges of the chimney the way you'd sight along a board — your eye will catch a lean the same way.

The crown. Get on the ladder and look at the crown from above. You're looking for cracks — any crack, hairline or otherwise — ponding water, pieces that have broken off, and whether the flue liner still has its expansion joint or whether

the crown has cracked tight against the liner. Press on the crown with your hand. If it moves, crumbles, or sounds hollow, it's failed.

The cap and flue. Is the cap still there? Is it secure? Is the spark arrestor screen intact or rusted through? Shine the flashlight down the flue and look for broken or displaced clay tiles, heavy creosote buildup, bird nests, or debris. If you can't see down the flue clearly, that's information too — call a sweep.

The firebox. Look at every firebrick and every joint inside the burn chamber. Scrape a joint with a screwdriver — if the mortar crumbles, it's failing. Look for firebrick that's cracked through, spalling, or missing. Look at the back wall and the floor especially; that's where the heat concentrates.

The base. Where the fireplace meets the patio or the ground, look for separation — a gap opening between the structure and the slab. Look for horizontal cracking at the base. Look at the soil around the footing: is it pulling away in a dry spell? Is water ponding against the structure after rain?

Write down what you find and date it. Compare year to year. The value of the inspection isn't just finding problems — it's

knowing which small problem is getting bigger and which one is stable. A hairline crown crack that's the same three years running is a maintenance item. A hairline crack that doubled in a year is a repair job. You can't know the difference without last year's notes.

Chapter 11: Hiring the Mason — Red Flags and Green Lights

Outdoor masonry is where the good masons separate from the pretenders, and it's also where homeowners get burned the most, because the work looks simple and the problems take years to show up. Here's what I've learned about hiring for this work.

Green lights. He asks about the footing before he talks about the brick. He specifies firebrick and refractory mortar for the firebox without being asked. He describes his crown detail — thickness, slope, overhang, expansion joint — in specific terms. He wants to see the site before he bids, not quote from a photo. His bid itemizes: footing, firebox, flue, crown, cap, veneer, waterproofing, cleanup. He mentions permits. He gives you a cure time for the mortar before first use. He has photos of outdoor fireplaces he built five or more years ago, not just fresh builds — anybody's work looks good the day it's finished.

Red flags. The bid is dramatically cheaper than the others and doesn't itemize — something big is missing, usually the

footing or the firebox materials. He says a mortar skim coat is fine for the crown. He wants to build the firebox from regular brick "because it's outside." He doesn't mention the flue or the cap. He can't show you an outdoor fireplace he built more than two years ago. He asks for most of the money up front. He tells you permits aren't needed for any of it. He gets annoyed when you ask about the details in Chapter 7 — a good mason loves those questions because they tell him you're serious.

The bid itself. Get three bids. They should be within shouting distance of each other — if two are at \$6,000 and one is at \$2,800, the cheap one isn't a bargain, it's a different job. Compare the itemized scopes line by line, not the bottom numbers. And ask each bidder the same question: "What's the thing most likely to go wrong with this structure in ten years, and what are you doing to prevent it?" The good ones will give you the same honest answer — water and soil movement — and show you where in their build they've addressed it.

Chapter 12: The Seasonal Care Calendar

Put this on the fridge or in your phone. It's the whole maintenance program for an outdoor brick fireplace or outdoor kitchen in one page.

Fall (October–November). Do the annual inspection from Chapter 10. Have the flue swept if you burn wood. Check the cap and spark arrestor. Service the gas burner if you have one. Seal any hairline crown cracks before winter. This is also the best season to schedule repair work — masons have availability and mortar cures well in cool dry air.

Winter (December–February). Burn season. Keep fires reasonable — no bonfires in a residential firebox. Watch for new efflorescence after rains; it tells you where water is getting in. In a hard freeze, don't be surprised by minor new hairline cracks — note them and check whether they've grown by spring.

Spring (March–May). Storm season. After the first big hailstorm, walk the structure. Check for wind-driven rain damage on the weather side. This is when most people discover the cap blew off or loosened — check it. If you had

winter cracking, spring is the time to repoint, before summer heat makes mortar work miserable.

Summer (June–August). Drought watch. If the soil is pulling away from the footing, water the ground around the base to keep the clay stable. Don't run the sprinkler directly at the masonry — you're managing soil moisture, not washing the brick. If you're planning a new build, summer is the time to get bids and get on a mason's fall schedule.

That's it. An hour a year of attention, plus the annual inspection, and an outdoor brick fireplace built right will outlive the patio furniture, the grill, and probably the fence. Neglect it, and it'll teach you the lesson every chapter of this book is trying to save you from: water always wins, unless you give the structure a way to win first.

Chapter 13: When to Repair, When to Rebuild, and What It Costs

Here's the decision tree I use when I walk up to an outdoor brick fireplace or outdoor kitchen that needs work.

Repair it when: the firebox has isolated damaged firebrick or deteriorated joints but the structure is sound; the crown is cracked but intact and can be sealed or coated; the exterior joints need repointing but the brick is sound and the structure is plumb; the cap is missing or damaged; the flue liner has isolated cracks. These are maintenance jobs. Outdoor brick fireplace repair in this category typically runs \$300 on the low end — a cap, some sealant — up to \$2,500 or so for repointing plus crown work plus firebox touch-up. Most of the outdoor fireplace work I do in DFW lands in this band.

Rebuild it when: the structure is leaning or has shifted on its footing; the top courses are crumbling from water intrusion and the damage goes deep; the firebox was built wrong from the start — wrong materials, wrong size — and patching it is throwing good money after bad; the smoke chamber or flue

is compromised beyond lining. A partial rebuild — taking the chimney down to sound brick and rebuilding up with a proper crown — typically runs \$2,000 to \$5,000. A full teardown and rebuild of an outdoor fireplace runs \$5,000 to \$12,000 depending on size and design, and a full new brick outdoor fireplace built right from the start runs \$3,000 to \$8,000 in the DFW market for a basic design, more for custom work.

The kitchen version: repair the island when the issues are surface — repointing, veneer touch-up, countertop resealing. Rebuild when the structure has settled or cracked through the block core, which usually means the footing failed and the whole island needs to come down to a proper foundation.

A note on timing: fall and winter are the best time to schedule this work in Texas. Masons are less slammed than in the spring rush, the mortar cures well in cool dry weather, and your fireplace will be ready for the season you actually use it. Scheduling a build in late fall or winter can save you 5 to 10 percent on labor, and more importantly, you'll get the crew's full attention instead of their leftover hours.

And one thing I tell everybody who owns one of these: get your outdoor fireplace inspected once a year, same as an

indoor chimney. A chimney sweep or mason with a ladder and a flashlight can spot a cracked crown, a failing firebox joint, or a missing cap in twenty minutes. The inspection costs a couple hundred dollars. Every catastrophic outdoor fireplace failure I've ever repaired started as a small problem somebody didn't see for three years. The cheapest repair is the one you catch early.

If you're looking at work on an outdoor structure and want to know what a fair bid looks like, the [free brick repair books](<https://metro-foundation-repair.web.app/free-books/>) in my library cover the other side of the house — chimneys, tuckpointing, the whole envelope. And for the structure itself, my crew does [outdoor masonry repair](<https://championbrickrepair.com>) across the DFW area and central Texas. Fifty years in this trade has taught me that the outdoor fireplace is the structure that separates the masons from the pretenders — hire accordingly.

About the Author

Travis Nech has spent 50 years in Texas brick, masonry, and foundation work. He owns [Champion Brick Repair](<https://championbrickrepair.com>) — (817) 900-6324 — [Metro Foundation Repair](<https://metrofoundationrepair.com>) — (817) 670-4474 — and the [LintelLOCK](<https://lintlerepair.com>) lintel system — (469) 730-0650. All his books are free at [Travis Nech's Free Book

Library](<https://metro-foundation-repair.web.app/free-books/>).