

## Buying Guide for Camping Equipment

Camping equipment has come a long way from the days of Yucca Packs and Baker Tents! Every year, manufacturers come out with a fancier gadget designed to make life in the backcountry a little easier. It can be confusing and a bit overwhelming to buy camping equipment. This small tutorial is designed to help you along as you make your decisions when you look for gear. There are many places you can purchase or acquire camping stuff...

- **Hand-me-downs:** If you had another family member who used to camp (or still does) they might be willing to recycle some of their older gear. Always ask family members, neighbors, and friends first to see if they have anything to spare.
- **Ask us!** Any of the leaders in the troop might be willing to lend out or give some their experienced equipment.
- **Yard/garage sales:** These are excellent resources for some good deals on gear.
- **Buying used and/or damaged:** Some retailers have areas that have deeply discounted items that might not be so bad!
- **E-Bay!** The latest Internet trend... try it out!
- **Buy brand new:** There are plenty of retailers in the area to buy new equipment from. Also, try on-line/catalogue retailers as well.

### Area Retailers

**Cabella's:** Route 61 & 78, Hamburg  
(Listed here because of proximity to camp)

**Dick's Sporting Goods:** 2430 Chemical Rd. Plymouth Meeting  
And  
2518 Moreland Rd. Willow Grove

**Eastern Mountain Sports:** The Montgomeryville Mall  
And  
The King of Prussia Mall  
Also  
Lancaster Ave. Ardmore

**Nestors Sporting Goods:** Route 309, Quakertown

**REI:** 200 West Ridge Pike, Conshohocken

**The Sports Authority:** 751 Horsham Rd. Lansdale

Also K-Mart, Wal-Mart, and Target have camping/outdoor departments. They are listed here because cost, but you do get what you pay for!

## **How to choose a SLEEPING BAG:**

When you camp, you spend eight to nine hours asleep (or lying) in your sleeping bag. It is important to choose the right one for your boy. This will cover some of the basics associated with sleeping bags:

- **Cut:** The most popular cut of a sleeping bag is a mummy cut. This is the most efficient way of keeping you warm, but they can be constraining. A semi-mummy (or semi-rectangular) bag remedies this, but it gives up some heat retention. A rectangular bag is the standard cut and provides the least amount of heat retention. Many rectangular bags are not even temperature rated. (See below)
- **Rating:** Most sleeping bags come with a temperature rating. What this means is what temperature you will be comfortable at if you were sleeping outside, in a tent, on a sleeping pad. A three-season bag is any bag rated between +10° F and +35° F. A winter bag is rated from +5° F to -40° F. A summer bag is 40° F and up or have no rating.
- **Fill:** Bags come in two basic fills, goose down and synthetic fibers. Goose down is natural goose or duck feathers and come in various fill types. (Like 400 or 700- these are fill ratings based on loft, we'll cover that next) Down bags are comfortable, warm, last long, and very compressible. But, if they become wet, the insulation is useless. The bag will not retain your body heat. Also, some people are allergic to down. Synthetic bags are not as compressible as down, will be better at retaining heat when wet. Synthetics do not last as long as down and come in a variety of different brand-name fills.
- **Loft:** Basically, how fluffy a bag is. All bags should be "fluffed" before use to ensure that the loft is maintained and is there before you sleep. The higher the down rating the more loft. A 700-fill rating uses less down to achieve the desired rating and vice-versa for a 400-fill rating.

Other features on bags include, stuff sacks, compressions sacks, hoods, draft tubes, and storage sacks. Some are specially lined (especially down bags) with a waterproof-breathable layer.

**Recommendation:** We recommend you use a three-season synthetic mummy bag. The bag should be light enough and compressible enough to take on a backpacking trip. Kids tend to get things wet and a down bag would not keep them warm at night. Blankets or fleece bags can be used in the winter to make the bag warmer.

**Other tips from the camping guru:** Sleeping bags come in different sizes! Make sure your boy tries it out before settling on a bag. If there is space in the bottom of the bag, make sure your boy stuffs the clothes he'll wear tomorrow in the bottom of the bag; that way his feet will stay warm all night and the next day's clothes are nice-n-toasty. Make sure you store your bag dry and uncompressed. This will extend the life of the bag and the loft will be retained better. Don't forget to wash your bag every so often in a **FRONT-LOADING WASHER ONLY!!!** A regular top-loading machine will destroy your bag!

## **How to choose a SLEEPING PAD:**

In order to get a good night sleep, some padding between you and the ground makes all the difference in the world. Here are some tips in choosing the right pad.

- **R-value:** The amount of protection against heat loss. A term most often found in home insulation, R-value is important to sleeping pads since the most important key to sleeping well is staying warm. The higher the R-value, the warmer the pad.
- **Open-Cell foam/Closed-cell foam:** An excellent example of open-cell foam is an egg crate mattress. The foam is porous, lightweight, and very comfortable. Open-cell is bulky and has a low R-value. Closed-cell foam is a regular standard pad. They are compact, non-porous, and provide an excellent R-value. They tend to be heavier and may not be as comfortable. Some pads combine the two to offer comfort and the insulation.
- **Air mattresses:** Mattresses that use air come in two types, pump-up and self-inflating. Pump-up air mattresses are big and bulky, prone to punctures, and can be cold to sleep on because air is not a good insulator of heat. These types of mattresses are not recommended on all camping trips. Self-inflating mattresses have closed-cell foam in them and provide the best insulation, compressibility, comfort, and weight.
- **Length:** Many come in  $\frac{3}{4}$  and standard lengths. The  $\frac{3}{4}$  length pads are designed to insulate your head and torso, while the full length will insulate your entire body.

You can choose anything from a cheap standard closed-cell pad, to an expensive self-inflating 3-inch thick luxury mattress. One of the more popular pads is a brand called Therm-a-rest. These self-inflating, closed-cell foam air mattresses are excellent since they are compact, lightweight, and comfortable. But you pay for it since they are rather pricey.

**Recommendation:** We recommend any closed cell sleep pad that has an R-value over one. There are many choices out there and the pad should be easily rolled for compactness and ease on trips away from camp.

**Other tips from the camping guru:** Therm-a-rest has imitators, but nothing compares to Cascade Designs when it comes to their lifetime warranty. (They really do stand by their products) If your boy likes camping, they are well worth the investment- take care of them by always leaving them unrolled with the valve open while in storage, as is the case with all self-inflating pads. A stuff sack for your Therm-a-rest is must since it will keep them clean and they are nice for rolling them up tight on trips. Big fluffy pads or air mattresses are good for Summer Camp and that's about it. If you have one of these lying around as a guest bed, they could be sent to camp with your boy to sleep on. They are not necessary for weekend trips- your boy will survive for two nights.

## **How to choose a TENT:**

Even though Hawk Mountain Camp has cabins and lean-tos to sleep in, our trips sometimes carry us away from camp. Your boy may need a tent on these trips. Here are some tips on how to pick the right one for your needs.

- **Season:** There are three ratings for tents, three-season, four-season, and convertible tents. A three-season tent can be used from spring to fall. These tents have mesh for ventilation. A four-season tent can be used year round but might be hot in the summer since they have little or no mesh. A convertible tent can solve this problem by unzipping some paneling to expose mesh.
- **Style:** Gone are the days of the A-frame “pup-tent.” Most tents are of a dome design or a variation. There are non-freestanding tube tents, which require staking and are generally lightweight and compact.
- **Flies:** Just about every tent comes with a rain fly. This extra layer of nylon has a coating on one side to make it more waterproof. Some rain flies come with factory sealed seams. On backpacking tents, the rain fly will extend out from the door to form a vestibule. This can be used for gear storage outside of your tent.
- **Fabric/Seams:** All tents are made from some type of nylon. Nylon is lightweight, durable, breathable, and can be coated with a waterproofing chemical. Tent floors are usually made from a tougher fabric or doubled layered nylon fabric. Some manufacturers seal their own seams, some include seam seal with their tents, and still others don’t do anything at all.
- **Footprints:** Are an extra piece of fabric between the tent and the ground that matches the floor of your chosen tent. Footprints help protect the tent and serve as a moisture barrier so your floor doesn’t get wet. (These are worth the investment) A tarp can also serve this purpose if no footprint exists.

**Recommendation:** We recommend a three-season, domed (or close variation) tent that can sleep at least two. The tent does not have to be a backpacking tent but should be light enough to carry backpacking.

**Other tips from the camping guru:** Tents are optional in our troop. We have lean-tos at camp plus we inherited tents from other troops. But if your boy likes camping or backpacking, a tent might be a good investment. An expensive tent will last a long time if properly cared for and used right. Drying and cleaning the tent after each use, seam sealing, and reapplying the waterproofing on the fly will extend the life of any tent you buy. A single person tent is not recommended since your boy cannot share the burden of carrying the tent during a backpacking trip. Also, we expect boys to share tents and sleep together on some trips. Someone bringing a single tent is a bit selfish. Make sure you set up the tent at your house before venturing out into the unknown!

## **How to choose a BACKPACK:**

You carry everything you need to survive on your back for a weekend, sometimes for a week. Your backpack should fit you right and be comfortable or you will be miserable. (Really)

- **External Frame Packs:** These have a pack attached to a rigid aluminum (or plastic...) frame. With this pack, your shoulders, back, and hips share the weight. They are excellent choice for the beginning hiker. They are relatively inexpensive, have a cooler temperature on your back because the pack sits away from your body. They can carry heavy loads nicely and be decked out with a lot of gear. They are not great on agility and balance, and their adjustment is limited due to the frame.
- **Internal Frame Packs:** Are usually a narrow bag with aluminum (or plastic...) bars or “stays” inside them, which gives the pack its rigidity. The aluminum stays can be removed (usually) to bend and contour to your back. Internals are flexible and allow you to move more freely on the trail. They help keep your balance better and you have better center of gravity. Some internal frame packs offer a wide range of adjustability. You’ll pay more for an internal frame back, and they sit right against your back making you sweat more. Some packs do not come with a lot of extra pockets to store gear like the externals.

The trend has been toward internal frame packs. Most retailers are responding to this by carrying more internal frame packs. Don’t be fooled into buying a pack if your boy is not comfortable in one. Make sure someone properly fit you, adjusts, and encourages you to try out a pack before you buy one. The fit of the pack makes all of the difference.

**Recommendation:** We recommend a highly adjustable pack that will grow with your boy. Be sure to look at the torso size and fit- one that will adjust between 13 and 21 inches.

**Other tips from the camping guru:** I’ll forewarn you now: the guru is biased toward internal frame packs! Internal vs. external is like chocolate vs. vanilla- with chocolate winning hands down! Internals are becoming highly versatile with plenty of pockets and many accommodating features for the backpacker including a hydration bladder holster and quick outlet, waterproof bottoms, and a detachable top compartment for use as a daypack. Make sure you get a pack cover. Despite popular belief backpacks are not waterproof and they will get soaked in the rain. I’ll say one thing nice about externals: they allow you to pack more stuff so your partner, who has one, will have a heavier pack!

## **How to choose HIKING BOOTS:**

On backpacking trips, (which we go on quite frequently) this item is essential. They can also make or break your trip so wearing the correct ones can make all the difference.

- **Material:** Most boots are made of leather, synthetic leather, fabric, or a combination of these materials. Leather is very supportive, rugged, and not easily broken in. Synthetic leather (nubuck) is softer, a little less supportive, and easily broken in. The fabric found on many hiking boots is similar to sneakers and offer the same in their support, comfort, and break-in period.
- **Fit:** Your boy should try on many different types of boots to see which ones fit the best. Avoid “branding” and choosing a pair of boots because your son’s friend has them. You should ideally buy the boots at a store that will take the time to fit you properly.
- **Soles:** Rubber soles are still the standard, but other types of soles are beginning to sneak in. Soles should have thick lugs (like tires) for grip and longer tread life.
- **Gore-tex:** Is an (in this author’s opinion) unnecessary option on most boots. Do not spend the extra money on a pair of boots with Gore-tex. Get a leather/fabric treatment that will waterproof your boots. You’ll need the treatment anyway for Gore-tex boots- a bit redundant don’t you think?

**Recommendation:** Any boot that is supportive and fits is right for your boy, but it shouldn’t be a simple procedure. Make sure you try on many different pairs of boots to make sure you have the best fits. Be sure to ask about room in the toes, arch support, and heel slippage.

**Other tips from the camping guru:** REI has certified boot fitters (the author was one of them!) that have knowledge and patience for fitting your feet. If your boy enjoys backpacking and hiking it is strongly recommended to invest in a good pair of boots. Socks are also important when getting your boots. A synthetic or merino wool backpacking/hiking sock will work well as a single layer. A liner and wool sock will also work; both methods work and it is based on personal preference. **NO COTTON SOCKS!!!! Blisters WILL FORM on your boy’s feet!** Make sure you wear the socks that you’ll be using on the trail while trying on your boots.

### **Other CAMPING GEAR:**

- Backpacking stoves are becoming the only accepted way to cook in the backcountry. An investment in this might be useful for your boy if he enjoys backpacking. There are two types of stoves: liquid fuel and compressed gas stoves. Liquid fuel stoves can be difficult to light and require a fuel bottle. The compressed gas stoves use butane/propane for fuel, are easier to light and require replaceable fuel cartridges.
- Water filtration/purifiers are another gadget brought on backpacking trips. These filters are expensive and the replacement cartridges are equally expensive. We don't recommend buying one. The leaders typically carry a few to filter water. If you must supply your boy with something, iodine tablets are the way to go.
- Flashlights have come a long way. They are much lighter and the trend lately has been toward headlamps and LED lights. Anything that throws off a decent amount of light should be good.
- Gore-tex rain gear may seem like a good idea, but it isn't! Let your boy wear a poncho or a regular rain suit. Gore-tex (and its equivalents) fabric requires a lot of maintenance to make sure it functions properly.
- Cotton clothing is acceptable for most camping trips, but cotton does have its drawbacks. A pair of synthetic pants and shirt can make the world of difference in the rain & cold. Also having plenty to change into is a good idea. Make sure you get a sense of how much clothing your boy goes through on a camping trip.
- Hydration is important on all trips. Your boy may want a Camelback to carry around water. It is a good choice on a backpacking trip as well. Nalgene bottles are also trendy and are a good choice for lugging water.
- A personal First Aid kit is a required piece of equipment on all trips. The kit your boy designed for First Aid merit badge should be used.
- A mess kit might be necessary on certain trips. Cook kits might also be something your boy needs on backpacking trips.

**Other tips from the camping guru:** Camping is what you make of it. Rain or shine, you can have fun in the backcountry if your attitude is right. Because we strive to make the experience great for all, we ask the boys leave their Gameboys, CD/MP3 player, walkmans, and anything along those lines at home. Books, journals, and cameras are welcomed on trips since they do enhance the experience. The more your boy is away from these "conveniences" they can begin to appreciate the outdoors in a way they never thought possible.