

Arizona Wildfire and the Environment Series

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Introduction

Arizona's population is growing, its urban areas and its communities in rural areas are rapidly expanding, and people are building more homes in what was once natural forest, grass and brush lands. Thus, it is important people know how to correctly landscape their property to reduce wildfire hazards. Improper landscaping can greatly increase the risk of structure and property damage from wildfire. It is a question of when, not if, a wildfire will strike any particular area.

Defensible Space

Creating defensible space around your home is a primary determinant in helping it to survive a wildfire. Defensible space is an area around a structure where fuels and vegetation are treated, cleared or reduced to slow the spread of wildfire towards the structure. It also reduces the chance of a structure fire moving from the building to the surrounding forest. Defensible space provides room for firefighters to do their jobs. Your house is more likely to withstand a wildfire if grasses, brush, trees and other common forest fuels are managed to reduce a fire's intensity. If you have not created defensible space around your home, firefighters may bypass your house, choosing to make their stand at a home where their safety is more assured and the chance to successfully protect the structure is greater.

Landscaping Defensible Space

People often resist creating defensible space because they believe that it will be unattractive, unnatural and sterile-looking. It doesn't have to be! Wise landowners carefully plan landscaping within the defensible space. This effort yields a many-fold return of beauty, enjoyment and added property value.

Arizona has great diversity in climate, geology and vegetation. Home and cabin sites can be found from the foothills through 8,000-foot elevations. Such extremes present a challenge in recommending plants. While native plant materials generally are best, a wide range of species can be grown successfully in Arizona.

Many plant species are suitable for landscaping in defensible space. Use restraint and common sense, and pay attention to plant arrangement and maintenance. It has often been said that how and where you plant are more important than what you plant. While this is indeed true, given a choice among plants, choose those that are more resistant to wildfire.

Consider the following factors when planning, designing and planting the Firewise landscape within your home's defensible space:

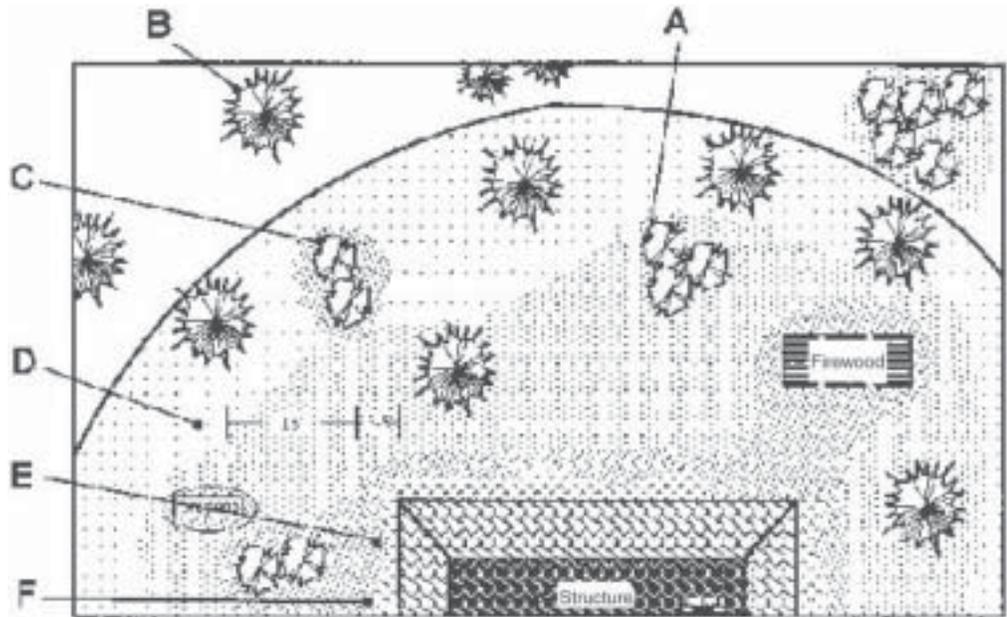
- Landscape according to the recommended defensible-space zones. That is, the plants near your home should be more widely spaced and lower growing than those farther away.
- Do not plant in large masses. Instead, plant in small, irregular clusters or islands.
- Use decorative rock, gravel and stepping stone pathways to break up the continuity of the vegetation and fuels. This can modify fire behavior and slow the spread of fire across your property.
- Incorporate a diversity of plant types and species in your landscape. Not only will this be visually satisfying, but it should help keep pests and diseases from causing problems within the whole landscape.

At a Glance

- More people are moving into Arizona's rural areas, increasing the chances of wildfire.
- "Defensible space" is the primary determinant of a structure's ability to survive wildfire.
- Native species are generally the best plant materials for landscaping in defensible space
- To be a FIREWISE homeowner, plan well, use the right plants in the right places, and maintain well.

Figure 1: Forested property surrounding a homesite; shows optimum placement of vegetation near the structure.

- A. Mow grass short around shrubs.
- B. The best tree species to plant generally are those naturally occurring on or near the site.
- C. Plant low-growing, non-resinous shrubs near structures.
- D. Keep grass mown around structure to a maximum of 8 inches.
- E. Plant wildflowers near structures only if they are well-irrigated and cut back during the dormant season.
- F. Gravel area or mow grass short next to the structure.



- In the event of drought and water rationing, prioritize plants to be saved. Provide available supplemental water to plants closest to your house.
- Use mulches to conserve moisture and reduce weed growth. Mulch can be organic or inorganic. Do not use pine bark, thick layers of pine needles or other mulches that readily carry fire.
- Be creative! Further vary your landscape by including bulbs, garden art and containers for added color. (See Figure 1.)

Grasses

During much of the year, grasses ignite easily and burn rapidly. Tall grass will quickly carry fire to your house. Mow grasses low in the inner zones of the defensible space. Keep them short closest to the house and gradually increase height outward from the house, to a maximum of 8 inches. This is particularly important during fall, winter and before green-up in early spring, when grasses are dry, dormant and in a “cured” fuel condition. In Arizona wildfires can occur any time of the year. Maintenance of the grassy areas around your home is critical. Mow grasses low around the garage, outbuildings, decks, firewood piles, propane tanks, shrubs, and specimen trees with low-growing branches.

Ground Cover Plants

Replace bare, weedy or unsightly patches near your home with ground covers, rock gardens, vegetable gardens and mulches. Ground cover plants are a good alternative to grass for parts of your defensible space. They break up the

monotony of grass and enhance the beauty of your landscape. They provide a variety of textures and color and help reduce soil erosion. Consider ground cover plants for areas where access for mowing or other maintenance is difficult, on steep slopes and on hot, dry exposures.

Ground cover plants are usually low growing. They are succulent or have other Firewise characteristics that make them useful, functional and attractive. When planted in beds surrounded by walkways and paths, in raised beds or as part of a rock garden, they become an effective barrier to fire spread. The ideal groundcover plant is one that will spread, forming a dense mat of roots and foliage that reduces soil erosion and excludes weeds.

Mulch helps control erosion, conserve moisture and reduce weed growth. It can be organic (compost, leaf mold, hardwood bark chips, shredded leaves) or it can be inorganic (gravel, rock, decomposing granite).

When using organic mulches, use just enough to reduce weed and grass growth. Avoid thick layers. When exposed to fire, they tend to smolder and are difficult to extinguish. Likewise, while your property might yield an abundance of needles from your native pines or other conifers, don't use them as mulch because they can readily catch and spread wildfire. Rake, gather and dispose of them often within your defensible space.

Wildflowers

Wildflowers bring variety to a landscape and provide color from May until frost. Wildflower beds give a softer, more natural appearance to the otherwise manicured look often resulting from defensible space development.



Figure 2: Ladder fuels enable fire to travel from the ground surface into shrubs and then into the tree canopy.

A concern with wildflowers is the tall, dense areas of available fuel they can form, especially in dormancy. To reduce fire hazard, plant wildflowers in widely separated beds within the defensible space. Do not plant them next to structures unless the beds are frequently watered and weeded and vegetation is promptly removed after the first hard frost. Use gravel walkways, rock retaining walls or irrigated grass areas mowed to a low height to isolate wildflower beds from each other and from other fuels.

Shrubs

Shrubs lend color and variety to the landscape and provide cover and food for wildlife. However, shrubs can add significantly to total fuel loading around a home. The primary concern with shrubs is they can serve as “ladder fuel” and carry a relatively easy-to-control ground or grass fire into tree crowns. Once a fire reaches into the tops of trees (the crowns) it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to control (see Figure 2).

To reduce the fire-spreading potential of shrubs, plant only widely separated, low-growing, nonresinous varieties close to structures. Do not plant them directly beneath windows or vents or where they might spread under wooden decks. Do not plant shrubs under tree crowns or use them to screen propane tanks, firewood piles or other flammable materials. Plant shrubs individually or in small clumps apart from each other and away from any trees within the defensible space.

Mow grasses low around shrubs. Prune dead stems from shrubs annually. Remove the lower branches and suckers sprouts from trees to raise the canopy away from possible surface fires.

Trees

Trees provide a large amount of available fuel for a fire and can be a significant source of fire brands — stems and branches, carried in the smoke column ahead of the main fire rapidly spreading the fire in a phenomenon known as “spotting”. Radiant heat from burning trees can also ignite nearby shrubs, trees and structures.

Arizona’s elevation and temperature extremes limit tree selection. The best species to plant generally are those already growing on or near the site. Others may be planted with careful selection and common sense.

If your site receives enough moisture, plant deciduous trees such as aspen or narrow-leaf cottonwood. These species, even when planted in dense clumps, generally do not burn well, if at all. The greatest problem with these trees is the accumulation of dead leaves in the fall. Remove accumulations close to structures as soon as possible after leaf drop.

When site or available moisture limits recommended species to evergreens, carefully plan their placement. Do not plant trees near structures. Leave plenty of room between trees to allow for their growth. Spacing within the defensible space should be at least 10 feet between the edges of tree crowns. On steep ground, allow even more space between crowns. Plant smaller trees initially on a 20- to 25-foot spacing to allow for tree growth. At some point, you will have to thin your trees to retain proper spacing.

As the trees grow, prune branches to a height of 10 feet above the ground. Do not overprune the crowns. A good rule of thumb is to remove no more than one-third of the live crown of the tree when pruning. Prune existing trees as well as ones you planted.

Some trees tend to keep a full crown. Other trees grown in the open may also exhibit a full growth habit. Limit the number of trees of this type within the defensible space. Prune others as described above and mow grasses around such specimen trees.

Structural Elements of a FIREWISE Landscape

When building a deck or patio, use concrete, flagstone or rock instead of wood. These materials do not burn and do not collect flammable debris like the space between planks in wooden decking.

Where appropriate on steeper ground, use retaining walls to reduce the steepness of the slope. This, in turn, reduces the rate of fire spread. Retaining walls also act as physical barriers to fire spread and help deflect heat from the fire upwards and away from structures.

Rock or masonry walls are best, but even wooden tie walls constructed of heavy timbers will work. Put out any fires burning on tie walls after the main fire front passes.

On steep slopes, consider building steps and walkways around structures. This makes access easier for home maintenance and enjoyment. It also serves as a physical barrier to fire spread and increases firefighters’ speed and safety as they work to defend your home.

Maintenance

A landscape is a dynamic system that constantly grows and changes. Plants considered fire resistant and which have low fuel volumes can lose these characteristics over time. Your landscape, and the plants in it, must be maintained to retain their Firewise properties.

- Always keep a watchful eye towards reducing the fuel volumes available to fire. Be aware of the growth habits of the plants within your landscape and of the changes that occur throughout the seasons.
- Remove annuals and perennials after they have gone to seed or when the stems become overly dry.
- Rake up leaves and other litter as it builds up through the season.
- Mow or trim grasses to a low height within your defensible space. This is particularly important as grasses cure.

- Remove plant parts damaged by snow, wind, frost or other agents.
- Timely pruning is critical. Pruning not only reduces fuel volumes but also maintains healthier plants by producing more vigorous, succulent growth.

Landscape maintenance is a critical part of your home's defense system. Even the best defensible space can be compromised through lack of maintenance. The old adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" applies here.

This fact sheet is based on and draws heavily from a publication titled "Fire-Resistant Landscaping" written by F.C. Dennis and produced by the Colorado State Forest Service. FIREWISE is a multi-agency program that encourages the development of defensible space and the prevention of catastrophic wildfire.

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