



Landscaping to Prevent Wildfire Damage

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Many residents in Tulare and Kings Counties live in the countryside on the valley floor or in the foothills. These areas are more susceptible to wildfire damage than city residential zones. Because of the drought this year, fire season is expected to start earlier and last longer throughout all of California. So everyone needs to be extra alert and cautious.

Meadow and ornamental grasses, shrubs, trees and other vegetation surrounding your home become a dangerous fuel source when climate conditions become dry and windy. When vegetation is cleared away, pruned or space apart, the chance of ignition during a wildfire diminishes. Does that mean that all plants should be removed? No.

UC Forestry Specialists and the CA Dept. of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) have several recommendations for property owners in high risk wildfire areas. Home landscaping for fire “prevention” incorporates some safety concepts that won’t eliminate fire damage, but can help homes survive a wildfire.



Create two zones on your property

A fire safe landscape can be divided into 2 zones: the home defense zone and the property ‘reduced fire fuel’ zone. The home defense zone is within 30 feet of the house. The property reduced fuel zone lies 30 to 100 feet from the house. Larger zones are needed when your home is on a steep slope or in a windswept exposure.

The general concept is that trees should be kept furthest from the house, shrubs can be closer, and bedding plants and lawns are closest to the house. The goal is to create landscape conditions that don’t support the spread of fire to other vegetation or to a building or structure.

The Home Defense Zone

Close to the house the goal is to have vegetation with high moisture content. Keep plants relatively short and spaced far apart and away from the home and surrounding structures. Keep plants pruned so that they are airy and not densely layered with leafy branches. Plants that are green and lush like lawns, groundcovers, and bedding plants form a greenbelt in the home defense zone and give better protection than trees and shrubs. An occasional individual tree or shrub is okay in this zone provided they are located at least 10 feet from the house.



To minimize the movement of fire from landscape plants to home structure, avoid putting plants adjacent to the siding of the home, under vents or eaves, under or near decks, and eliminate all tree limbs over the roof. Also be aware that organic mulches like straw, pine needles, and chipped or shredded bark can also ignite and smolder.

Be sure to remove all combustible materials (such as stacks of firewood, twigs, needles and leaves, dry or cured grasses, shrubs, building materials, cardboard boxes, and solvents) within 30 feet of the home, garage, sheds, and propane or other fuel tanks.

The Reduced Fuel Zone

The main goal in this zone is to reduce the number of shrubs and trees and remove lower tree branches. For property slopes that are less than 20% trim or space existing trees so that there is a minimum of 10 feet of space from limb tip of one tree to another. If trees are taller than 18 feet, prune lower limbs up to at least 6 feet from the ground and 15 feet is even better. This greatly reduces the chance of grass fires spreading into the tree crowns and then leaping on to the next tree.



From a wildfire fuel standpoint vegetation is described as vertical and horizontal fuel continuity. In fire fighter's lingo the vertical component is also referred to as "ladder fuel". Most wildfires begin as surface fires. They will not reach the crown of a tree if the ladder fuel has been removed.

Fire Resistant Plants

Even though some plants are marketed as fire resistant, all plants can burn under dry conditions. In general select plants that are low growing, open rather than densely branched, and low in resin content. Common forest trees such as junipers, pines, spruces, and firs are resinous and highly flammable.

Whether a plant ignites or not is less a factor of the species and more a result of the landscape maintenance, including spacing, pruning, irrigation, and clutter. For more detailed information on this topic consult: <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/pdf/8228.pdf>

Maintenance of your property is critical to wildfire safety for high risk areas. Memorial Day Weekend is coming up. It is time to get your chores done!

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