



The Art of Creating Defensible Space  
By Alice Cantelow  
UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

Your yard needs you! These cool wet days can be a great time to get serious about improving the defensible space around your home. In late winter, the chance of starting a wildfire yourself from the sparks of power equipment is greatly reduced and birds have not yet settled in to make nests in your trees. Yes, it is too early to weed eat in most places, but this can be a great time to remove dead branches and over-crowded shrubs and trees.

In January 2005, a new state law extended the defensible space clearance around homes and structures from 30 feet to 100 feet. This space is referred to as a Reduced Fuel Zone. Defensible space is not just a good idea, it is required by the County and the State. Some local residents have already been mailed County notices that defensible space inspections will begin in their neighborhoods, starting in April.

Does this mean you need to remove ALL vegetation within 100 feet of our house? Goodness no, nor does it mean you need to cut down all your beautiful mature trees. What you do need to do is to strategically reduce the vegetation in your yard, especially that which is the most flammable.

The best thing to do is to start at your house and work outwards, rather than the other way around, and to think of zones circling out. In the first five feet, remove all vegetations, bark mulch, and wood furniture. An aggressively ember-resistant first five feet will be required by Assembly Bill 3074, "Fire prevention: wildfire risk: defensible space: ember-resistant zones".

For the remainder of the next 30 feet, make sure any vegetation is low and well-spaced, and clear any potentially flammable areas like wood piles, lumber, highly flammable plants, or dead plant material. In general, within the first 100 feet, you want plants to be healthy, green, and isolated on their own. There should be no plants directly beneath them, next to them or above them. This will lessen the risk of fire traveling from one plant to another, leading the fire right on up to your house. For trees this means removing limbs on the lower six feet of the tree. For shrubs this means keeping them well pruned and away from each other by several feet.

Creating defensible space is really a bit of an art. As climate change causes more frequent and larger fires to happen in our state, we are learning to be smarter. More and more studies are being conducted to try and figure out what types of prevention really do work and what types are less effective in terms of homeowner preparation. We really don't need to be sitting ducks. We can create a buffer of defensible space and also harden our homes against wildfire. This will not guarantee that our homes and every memento we hold dear may not be reduced to a couple hundred cubic feet of toxic ash someday, but it can greatly increase the odds in our favor.

Join Master Gardener Alice Cantelow on February 27 to learn more about the nuts and bolts of fire-wise landscaping on your property, and there will also be a review of some of the latest science-based findings on defensible space. Register in advance for this virtual class: <https://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=32832>

*Due to the pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future continue to be limited. We realize our public classes are valued by county residents and we are doing our best to provide virtual learning opportunities. You can find our new online class schedule at: <https://ucanr.edu/EDCMasterGardeners/PublicEducationClasses> and recorded classes on many gardening topics here: <https://ucanr.edu/EDCMasterGardeners/PublicEducationClasses/Handouts-Presentations/>*

*The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open on the first and second Saturdays of each month from 9 AM – 12 noon. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the number of people allowed in the garden at one time is limited, and masks and distancing are required. Please check our website for more details at: <https://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/DemonstrationGarden>*

*Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the "Ask a Master Gardener" option on our website: <https://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu> We'll get back to you!*

*Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest. For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at: <https://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu> To sign up for notices and newsletters, see: <https://ucanr.edu/mastergardenerse-news>*