



The partnership of humans and nature in fire recovery: Part 6

Defensible Space and How to Create It

Tery Susman, UC Master Gardener of Mariposa County

Following the devastation of the Oak Fire, now is the time for all of us to do everything we can to improve our home's chance of surviving the next wildfire. We do this through creating DEFENSIBLE SPACE: the buffer between a building on the property and the grass, trees, shrubs, or any woodland area that surrounds it. This space is needed to slow or stop the spread of wildfire and it helps protect your home from catching fire - either from embers, direct flame contact or radiant heat. Defensible space also provides firefighters a safe area from which to defend your home!

Today's recommendations for fire-prone communities are rapidly evolving, but the fire experts are clear about this: *The most effective and efficient way to protect lives and property is from "the house out" rather than the wildlands in.*

We accomplish this by thinking about different zones expanding from our home, Zones 1 and 2 currently make up the 100 feet of defensible space require by law. However, a new law (beginning January 1, 2023) requires a third zone for defensible space: Zone 0. This is an ember-resistant zone within 0 to 5 feet of the house.

Zone 0 - Ember-Resistant Zone - extending 5 feet from buildings, structures, decks, etc. Science has proven these five feet to be the most important of all the defensible space zones. It includes the area under and around all attached decks, and requires the most stringent wildfire fuel reduction. The ember-resistant zone is designed to keep fire or embers from igniting materials that can spread the fire to your home. To accomplish this:

- Use hardscape like gravel, pavers, concrete, and other noncombustible mulch materials
- Remove all dead and dying weeds, grass, plants, shrubs, trees, branches and vegetative debris like leaves, needles cones, and bark.
- Remove all branches within 10 feet of any chimney or stovepipe outlet
- Relocate wood piles, garbage cans, combustible mulch, wooden fences and flammable plant material

Zone 1 - Lean, Clean, and Green Zone - extends 30 feet from buildings, decks and other structures.

- Remove all dead plants, grass and weeds
- Remove dead or dry leaves and pine needles from your yard, roof and rain gutters
- Prevent trees and large shrubs from touching each other or hanging over structures

(spacing of at least 10 feet)

- Remove “laddering” plants that can spread a ground fire up to a tree’s crown
- Relocate wood piles to Zone 2
- Create a separation between trees, shrubs and items that could catch fire, such as patio furniture, swing sets, picnic tables, etc.
- Provide good access to water within 30 feet of your home

Zone 2 - Reduce Fuel Zone - extends from 30 feet to 100 feet from buildings, decks and other structures

- Cut or mow annual grasses to a maximum height of four inches. Mow before 10 a.m. but NEVER when it’s windy or excessively dry
- Create both horizontal and vertical spacing between plants. Avoid laddering understory plants; space trees and shrubs at one to two times their mature height.
- Remove fallen leaves, needles, twigs, bark, cones and small branches. They may be permitted to a depth of 3 inches (ie. bark mulch)
- All exposed wood piles must have a minimum of 10 feet clearance around them, down to bare mineral soil, in all directions

In preparing to write this article, I spoke with Barbara Baptista, UC Master Gardener, about her experience with the Oak Fire and how she has created defensible space around her home. The Oak Fire came within 200-300 feet of her house and burned much of the surrounding woodland property. Prior to the fire, Barbara spent years developing a space that was defensible in the case of a wildfire.

When asked what she would advise to do first, she said tree removal within 30-100 feet of the main structure, eliminating all ladder fuel and mowing/weed eating grasses and weeds out to 100 feet, would be her first priorities. Barbara also worked closely with her neighbors to make sure the roadway to their homes was passable and clear of canopies. This allowed fire engines, fire crews, and large equipment to come in and protect the property as the Oak Fire spread in their direction.

To truly create defensible space as protection from the next wildfire, we must work both individually, on our own property and collectively, with our neighbors on common spaces that we share. Let’s all do our part to be fire ready.

Adapted from the California Native Plant Society Fire Recovery

Guide: <https://cnps.org/gove/priority-initiatives/fire-recovery>

Cal Fire, <http://www.readyforwildfire.org>

Next Up: The final article in the series: If Fire Comes Your Way- How to Prepare for Evacuation

UC Master Gardeners of Mariposa County are located in Mariposa at 5009 Fairgrounds Rd. Visit our website at <http://cemariposa.ucanr.edu/MasterGardener/> and Facebook page (UC Master Gardeners of Mariposa County) for more gardening information and events. UC Master Gardeners staff a Helpline serving Mariposa County, including Greely Hill, Coulterville and Lake Don Pedro (209-966-7078 or mgmariposa@ucdavis.edu). Listen to us on the radio at KRYZ 98.5 Mariposa on Wednesdays at 2:00 and Saturdays at 5:00.