

Fire Protection Planning: Have Your Garden And Defensible Space, Too

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Sept. 27, 2019

Q: With the red flag warnings this past week, I've been working in my yard, trying to make it as fire safe as possible. Do the master gardeners have any recommendations for fire safety in the landscape around the home? I love all my plants and don't want my home to look like a moonscape, but I don't want to lose my home in a fire.

A: Maintenance of your home and yard is an important factor in protecting your home from wildfire; especially keeping the roof and gutters free of dry leaves or pine needles. From fires over the past couple of years, we've learned the importance of keeping the first five feet around your house clear of materials that will easily burn. This means removing any wooden fences, stacked wood and shrubs from that area right up against the house, especially if they are under a window. Typical landscape design usually has bark mulch and shrubs right up against the home; if these catch on fire they can ignite siding or heat windows until they break, allowing the fire to enter the home.

According to fire experts, most of the homes that burn in a fire are ignited by large embers, not the flames of the main fire. Keep this in mind as you look over your yard.



A rock garden is seen December 2018 in Shasta, about five months after the Carr Fire burned through the area. (Photo: Jim Schultz/Record Searchlight)

In the five feet surrounding your house, replace plants with non-flammable materials such as rock or other hardscaping, well-watered lawn or gravel mulch. It is also important to keep this area free of any dead leaves that may start to accumulate this time of year.

Your yard doesn't have to become a moonscape, but it is important to separate groups of plants from non-flammable areas so that you don't lead the fire right up to your house.

It's also important to remove plants that are highly flammable. Look over the landscape area closest to your home, and remove plants that contain dry or dead material within the plant, plants with leaves, twigs and stems that contain volatile waxes, terpenes or oils — these plants usually have leaves that have a strong odor when crushed. Also remove shrubs or trees that have loose or papery bark and any dead woody material on the ground or in standing vegetation.



A cleared lot is seen in December 2018 in Shasta, about five months after the Carr Fire swept through the area. (Photo: Jim Schultz/Record Searchlight)

Other maintenance that can minimize fire risk to the house is to remove or thin shrubs to keep space between plants at least three times their height. Prune shrubs to maintain an open structure and prevent dense branching so that firebrands --- chunks of burning wood --- will fall to the ground rather than sitting in the branches and potentially

starting the plant on fire. Prune tree branches eight to ten feet above ground to keep fire out of the crown of the tree and to allow easier access for fire personnel to protect your house.

Don't forget the access to your home when you're looking over your yard. Make sure it is clear of hazards. You want to be able to leave safely in the event of a fire, and fire personnel need safe access.

Finally, don't forget to water your plants. Well-hydrated trees and shrubs are less likely to catch fire.

For more information on fire prevention, preparing for an evacuation or recovering from a wildfire, [check out the Shasta County Cooperative Extension site at http://ceshasta.ucanr.edu/Forestry/Recovery/](http://ceshasta.ucanr.edu/Forestry/Recovery/).

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.