

Creating a Fire-Resistant Landscape

Back in May we heard a lot about the tragedies caused by wildfires in New Mexico. The loss of homes, belongings, and trees were devastating.

Historically, plant communities such as the Ponderosa pine forests around those New Mexico homes, have burned naturally as a result of lightning strikes about every five years. Because the fires were a regular occurrence, in most cases they were not the intense catastrophic fires such as the fires of this year. Because the forests burned periodically, there wasn't as much fuel to burn. Therefore, the fires were not as hot.

Actually, by preventing the periodic natural fires, the people of New Mexico set the stage for the intense fires of this year. Though the park service in New Mexico realized the potential for the dangerous fires, there was little they could have done to prevent the fires. It had been too long since fires had been allowed to keep down the undergrowth, and the park service realized the potential for danger from even a controlled burn.

Here in north Florida we are fortunate that our landowners generally have been more progressive about control-burning the forests on a regular basis. We are reminded of this when we see the great plumes of smoke rising into the sky when government and private forest landowners prescribe- or control-burn the forests. Such prescribed burns keep down the buildup of undergrowth and other fuels that could fuel a catastrophic wildfire if allowed to accumulate.

Unfortunately, many of the people whose houses burned in New Mexico had neglected the management of their small forests around their homes. However, wildfire will sweep through an unmaintained small private forest just as it does through the larger forest. If the undergrowth builds up, it will provide fuel for a hot fire. Unfortunately, many of the New Mexico homeowners had thick woods growing right up to their houses. There was no defensible space. When the wildfires reached their properties, they kept right on going, consuming both trees and houses.

We have an opportunity to avoid such devastation here in Florida by managing our landscapes around our homes. Creating a fire-resistant landscape means balancing needs for shade, aesthetics, wildlife habitat, and defensible space. Controlled burns of the larger forest can reduce the threat of widespread wildfire. But maintaining the defensible space around your home provides the final and most certain barrier.

Fires need fuel to burn. Dead branches and pine needles burn quickly. So do many types of undergrowth. By creating and maintaining open space around your home, often called the "defensible space," you can reduce the chance that the fire will get close enough to ignite your home. A 50-foot safety zone around your home is the most crucial defensible space. Within this zone, here are some recommendations you should consider for fire protection:

1. Use patios, walkways, driveways, stone walls, and pools as fuel breaks.

2. Thin out existing trees to create at least 15 feet of open space between the crowns, and trim the lower branches up to at least 15 feet above the ground.
3. Create an open space of 20 feet around your house, clear of trees and large shrubs. Plant grass, flowers, green groundcovers, or small shrubs in this space. Keep them watered and green during dry seasons when fires are likely.
4. Create shrub islands of fire resistant landscape plants at least 10 feet apart. Prune shrubs to keep the foliage off the ground and reduce densities. Avoid conical shrubs that could direct fire upward. Fire resistant plants are those that are succulent and do not have flammable foliage. They would include many annual and perennial flowers and most broadleaf, deciduous shrubs and trees.
5. Remove small pine trees that are under larger trees or are clumped together. Remove all ladder fuel (limbs, vines, and shrubs that could channel fire from the ground to the tree canopy or your roof).
6. Irrigate through the dry season to keep groundcover green.
7. Clear at least 10 feet around woodpiles.
8. Remove dead and dying branches.
9. Remove saw palmetto, juniper, wax myrtle and small pines that are close to buildings. They burn easily and can throw sparks when they burn.

Removing all the trees around a home, unfortunately, would eliminate shade and increase the temperature of your yard and house. Older trees are less likely to burn in a ground fire, and fallen oak leaves can actually even prevent a fire from spreading. Consider keeping tall pines or planting oak or other broadleaf trees within the defensible space. Beyond this 50-foot safety zone, fuel loads should also be reduced to a distance at least 150 feet from your home. The goal is to slow the fire and keep it on the ground. To achieve this goal, it will be important to replace the flammable species with fire-resistant, drought-resistant plants and water your groundcover enough to keep it green and growing through the fire season, if possible.

Please heed this advice so that we don't repeat the mistakes of others.