



UI Extension Forestry Information Series

Top 10 worst reasons to not prepare your home for forest fires

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When teaching landscaping for fire prevention workshops and interacting with people who have read articles we have written on the topic, I have heard a lot of excuses for not preparing homes for fire. This topic has also been studied in surveys¹. So with apologies to David Letterman, here are 10 of the more common reasons for not doing defensible space, and some responses . . .

10. I've never seen a forest fire here in all my life.

Even prior to European settlement, moist forests in northern Idaho could go 50 years between ground fires, so it is very probable someone would not see a fire in their neighborhood for most of their life, particularly with modern fire suppression efforts. However, fire exclusion and selective cutting practices have changed the structure and species composition of Idaho forests significantly, resulting in a backlog of fuels. In many areas of Idaho, conditions are riper than ever for a forest fire.

9. The problem is on my neighbor's property.

Obviously you can't control your neighbor's landscape. But high fire hazard on your neighbor's property is all the more reason to make extra efforts to reduce risks you can control on your property. Recent research indicates features closest to the house (*the home ignition zone*) are the most important factors in whether a home burns down in a fire. So redouble efforts to reduce combustibles next to your house (e.g., needles collected in the gutters, firewood stored near the house). You can also share publications and other resources on this topic with your neighbors – sometimes all it takes is additional information from a third party to help people take action.

8. It's not my job (I pay taxes to have my home protected from forest fire).

Some folks believe preventing their home from burning down in a fire is what they pay taxes for. And we do pay a lot of people to keep fires from burning down homes – whether the fire starts inside the house or in the woods. But fires do not

always start and spread predictably. In a really big fire, no amount of manpower will be enough to protect all homes – especially homes that have not taken steps to reduce the flammability of their home and surrounding landscape and made their properties easily accessible to firefighters. You are more likely to get assistance from firefighters to the extent they have a fighting chance to survive defending your house.

7. I have no place to put the slash.

Disposing of trees, brush, and other organic materials accumulated in a fire risk reduction effort can be daunting. The standard

method is to pile it and burn the piles. But that may not be possible at all times of the year. You can sometimes haul it to a dump, but that gets expensive, both for the landowner (if the dump charges fees) or the taxpayer who is paying for that space in the landfill. Another option is to have the material chipped and spread through the surrounding forest. This approach has the added advantage of helping to suppress the emergence of additional vegetation. Do not spread the material right next to the house (fire will follow it to your house), avoid piling it deeper than one inch (deeper accumulations interfere with air and water movement in your soils), and do not mix it in with soils (the microorganisms that



decompose it will use up nitrogen in the soil, making it less available for trees). Some recycling centers provide a free drop for yard waste and chip it up to reduce landfill volume or provide it to landscapers for mulch.

6. I don't know what to do.

Extension offices have a wealth of publications, workshops, videos, and assistance from master gardeners to help you to prune, thin, control brush and otherwise reduce fire risk. Most firefighting agencies also have information. Perhaps you're not sure how to apply that in your specific context. There are a growing number of home landscaping services in Idaho who provide detailed on-site assistance with this for a fee.

5. I don't have the time or money.

Some of the activities to reduce home fire risk in a forested setting can cost a lot of money (e.g., replacing a wood roof). Other activities, (thinning, pruning, etc.) are less expensive but require time and sweat equity. But think - how much is your home worth? The old car mechanics adage applies ("you can pay me now or pay me - more - later"). Thinning and pruning trees reduces fire risk and improves your landscape's health, and may increase real estate value. Some Idaho communities now have grant funds available to help you hire someone to help you with some of these tasks – check with your local fire protection district about *hazardous fuel treatment* (HFT) funds.

4. I want it to be natural.

People have different ideas, in different contexts, for what is "natural". Historically, natural on many forested Idaho home sites would have meant ground fires coming through every 10-30 years killing small trees coming up in the understory (on medium to moist forests there would have been crown fires too). By that standard, many of our current forests are un-natural in both structure and species composition. Unless you are prepared to allow fires to burn through (and even then the results may not be natural, considering the historically unprecedented volume and configuration of fuels that have accumulated in the absence of fires), cutting excess small trees and shrubs in forest understory is one way of mimicking the effects of natural fires.

3. How can I make any difference for something as huge as a forest fire?

There are times when a fire is so powerful that all efforts to keep a house from burning down fail. However, this is a bit of a red herring. It is never a question of your home being at risk or not. The question is how to reduce your home's risk. The practices that reduce ignition potential have saved a lot of homes. Unfortunately, you don't usually hear as much about homes that survived forest fires as those which perish in them (seen any headlines to the effect of "dog doesn't bite man?").

2. I want my trees dense to screen my neighbors.

Many homeowners live in rural areas because they value privacy. Frequently people want to leave trees dense to screen noise and visuals (e.g., your neighbor's "outdoor antique car collection"). Some of this may be OK as long as the dense trees are at least 100 feet from your house. But even there, overcrowded trees are ultimately doomed to be killed by bark beetles, then present a greater fire risk. You are going to lose a lot of the screening effects anyway, as the lower branches of overcrowded trees die out from shade. Starting to thin them earlier will keep the lower branches longer. Additional screening could be provided by shrubs. If appropriate, earthen or other-non-organic screens provide a safer alternative than leaving dense stands of conifers.

1. It won't look good.

The quick response to this is to ask how your landscape and home will look after a forest fire comes through. But aside from that, some folks fear that reducing their fire risk will result in their landscape looking like a "bunker" or a "lunarscape". You can have a fire resistive landscape that is still very green and naturalistic. In fact one of the ways to keep your home more resistive to fires is to keep the landscape well watered and green (e.g., the lawn). The primary focus on reducing fire risk is to reduce the continuity of fuels (especially closest to the house), not to remove vegetation from the landscape entirely.

Conclusion

Fire risk reduction is not something you can or need to complete perfectly at once. Indeed, you will never be completely done, because it is important to maintain the risk reduction you have started. But don't let bad reasoning or uncertainty prevent you from taking the steps necessary to protect your home and surrounding forest.

1 Smith, E. and M Rebori. Factors Affecting Property Owner Decisions about Defensible Space. 2001. In: Forestry Extension: Assisting Forest Owner, Farmer and Stakeholder Decision-Making. Proceedings, 5th IUFRO (International Union of Forestry Research Organizations) Extension Working Party Symposium. D. Race and R. Reid, editors. Australian National University & CRC for Sustainable Production Forestry, Hobart Tasmania, Australia.

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