

Tips for Reducing Wildfire Risk While Achieving Other Landscaping Goals

by Sara Sillars

As people continue to move into the wildland-urban interface, firewise landscaping becomes more important for protecting homes and families from wildfires. Firewise landscaping can seem to conflict with other landscaping goals such as creating wildlife habitat or conserving water and energy, but few differences actually exist. In those instances where there are conflicting objectives, small modifications such as the following can be made.

Avoid flammable plants near your home

Firewise planting discourages planting shrubs and trees near the home; conversely, energy conservation landscaping principles recommend that trees and shrubs be placed close to the home for shading. To resolve this conflict, select shrub and tree species with low flammability. Leave 2 to 3 feet between shrub branches and your home, and trim shrubs to stay 2 feet below the windows. Trim tree branches up to 10 feet.

Well-maintained lawns have low flammability and are often used in firewise landscaping, but lawns are not recommended for creating wildlife habitat or

conserving water. A compromise is to keep a well-maintained lawn in high-traffic areas around the house and plant alternative ground covers in low-traffic areas and on the outer edges of the defensible space (defined as an area of modified vegetation extending at least 30 feet from the house in all directions). Some alternative ground covers include stones and organic mulches and plants of low flammability.

Maintain vertical separation

While firewise landscaping recommends reducing the vertical layering of vegetation, landscaping for wildlife encourages it for cover and habitat. If you live in an area at high risk of fire, you should give priority to firewise landscaping and maintain vertical separation within the defensible space. Beyond the defensible space, islands of vertically layered vegetation can be created as long as they are separated horizontally by areas cleared of dense vegetation.

Clear dead plant material and organic mulches away from the home

Removing dead plants and brush piles is recommended for firewise landscaping, but those plant materials provide excellent wildlife habitat. If the property is large enough, small isolated brush piles, snags, and other dead plant materials can remain as long as they are more than 60 feet from the home.

Firewise landscaping discourages the use of organic mulches close to the home due to their potential fire hazard; however, mulches are useful in landscaping for water conservation. To reduce potential fire risk, maintain an area 2 to 3 feet out from the home as bare ground or covered by rock or gravel. Choose organic mulches of low flammability. 🌳

For information on selecting plants based on flammability:

Selecting and Maintaining Plants for Firewise Landscaping at www.interfacesouth.org/products/fact_sheets/Selecting_Maintaining_Firewise_Plants_Landscaping.pdf.

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