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Researchers test fire-wise landscaping

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Local research on the flammability of common garden mulches is a key ingredient in a national study on how wildfires can impact homes.

Using four mulches commonly used around the country - pine straw, shredded cypress and small and large chunk pine bark nuggets - researchers here are testing their levels of ignition, flammability, combustibility and sustainability in a controlled-burn.

Many people use mulches directly up to and in contact with their homes, providing fuel to flames.

The experiments are being conducted at the Katharine Ordway Preserve east of Melrose, and are a cooperative effort between the USDA-Forest Service's Southern Center for Wildland-Urban Interface Research and Information in Gainesville, the University of Florida School of Forest Resources and Conservation and the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, Md.

Wayne Zipperer, research forester with the USDA-Forest Service, who is part of the team conducting the tests, said temperatures reached 700 to 800 degrees 4 inches above the pine straw and large chunk pine bark nuggets when they were set on fire. The smaller chunks reached 400 to 500 degrees and cypress radiated 300 to 400 degrees.

While moisture level was a critical factor, the pine straw tended to flare up immediately, but the pine bark tended to smolder and continue to generate heat, he said.

The local testing is just a part of a larger effort to help reduce risk of fires in places where homes are surrounded or bordered by vegetation.

Alan Long, associate professor with the forestry college, said fundamentals of fire-wise landscaping - including where mulch should be used - are being incorporated into Alachua County's new comprehensive plan.

"It doesn't mean no landscaping; it means choosing the proper plants," he said. "Hydrangea is fairly non-flammable; gallberry is not."

He also said location plays a role.

"If you are on a golf course on one side, you don't have much of a problem there," he said.

Zipperer said final results of the tests won't be completed for several months. An earlier study of his on the flammability of common landscape shrubs should be out this summer.

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