

FIRE-SAFE LANDSCAPING

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With wildfires seemingly becoming the new norm within the drought-stricken southwestern states, homeowners may feel helpless in trying to make their homes and properties less vulnerable to unpredictable fires. However, while wildfires may never be eliminated, there are practical steps each homeowner can take to decrease the chances of becoming a wildfire statistic.

The first step to improving the fire safety of your property is to properly design and maintain your landscape. The key concept is to start NOT by looking at your landscape, but at your house for ways to make it less flammable and more resistant to entry of flying embers during a wildfire. Fire resistant roofs and siding, baffled vents and sealed roof edges are among the most important examples of such firesafe features.

The second key to creating fire resistant landscaping is to break-up the continuity of fuels, so a fire isn't led to your structure. Ensuring a horizontal and vertical separation between plants is a great start. When arranging plants, plan for "defensible spaces", a firefighter term describing places from which they can safely protect a home. The first five feet from the house should be considered a non-flammable zone, meaning not only no plant materials, but also avoiding firewood stacks, fuel tanks, furniture, decorative items, and storage of wood or other flammable materials; a gravel, or paved, pathway around your home also works well in creating a non-flammable area.

Extending the safe zone further from your house is also crucial to maximizing fire resistance. Integrating low, healthy plant materials in clumps, 5 to 30 feet from your home, with pavement, gravel, or perhaps mown grass is recommended; this can be a good place for vegetable or flower planters. From 30-100 feet, or to your property line, consider well-maintained trees and clumps of bushes. However, make sure trees are trimmed at least 10 feet from a chimney and other trees, and 15 feet from the roof.

The third key to firesafe landscaping is choosing fire resistant plants. Any plant can burn when dead, so select plants that are easy to keep healthy and well-maintained. Fire resistant plants stay healthy with little water and maintain a high moisture content with limited watering – succulents are a good example. In addition, fire resistant plants don't produce a lot of dead material, especially in places hard to reach; for example, avoid Italian cypress, which can hide dead material underneath a nice, green outer layer. You should also avoid plants like eucalyptus which, not only drop a lot of dry bark, but contain volatile oils making these species more flammable. Native, drought resistant plants, except for a few species, such as buckwheats and manzanitas, which produce dead fine litter, can be excellent choices in a fire-resistant garden.

Finally, in all cases, maintain your plants and property throughout the year to reduce the amount of fuel near your home. Plan yard maintenance in the spring, since sparks from tools in the windy and dry conditions of

summer and fall have caused several fires over the past decades. If you are removing dead vegetation in the dry season, use hand tools and work when winds aren't expected.

Visit our website ucanr.org/safelandscapes for additional ideas on how to protect your home and property from fires.

Version published in VC Star:

Here are some practical steps California homeowners can take to decrease the chances of becoming a wildfire statistic:

Check your house: Take steps to make your home less flammable and less vulnerable to flying embers. Consider fire-resistant roofs and siding, baffled vents and sealed roof edges. Check this website for more information: ucanr.org/safelandscapes.

Plan a defensible space: This is an area 100 feet around your home where you space plants apart to prevent spread of fire and where firefighters can safely take a stand.

Landscaping within 5 feet of your home: Don't lead a fire to your home. There should be no plants, firewood, fuel tanks, wooden or rattan furniture or decorative items in this buffer zone. Instead, consider a gravel or paved pathway.

Landscaping within 5 to 30 feet of your home: Integrate low, healthy plant materials in clumps with pavement, gravel or mown grass. Vegetable or flower planters are OK.