

Ask an Expert – Landscape Now to Help Prevent Wildfire Destruction Later

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Recent drought concerns in Utah have prompted Governor Spencer Cox to issue an executive order declaring a state of emergency. To date, 100% of Utah is in the moderate drought category, and 90% of the state is experiencing extreme drought. Along with drought comes the dangers of wildfires, the hazards of suppressing them and the risks firefighters take to protect life and property. Property owners can assist firefighters and improve their own safety by preparing their structures and landscaping for the possibility of a wildfire.

The likelihood of a home burning is directly related to the amount of flammable material near it. The home and landscape near it are called the home ignition zone. A few hours of light-duty yard work are well worth the effort to protect this area. Consider the following tips.

- Replace wood roofs with fire-resistant roofing material. Enclose the eaves with soffits and screen openings with 1/8" galvanized mesh. This will reduce the chances that blowing embers could start a fire in an attic space.
- During a fire, burning embers land in some of the same places that collect leaves, needles and other debris, so it is important to regularly clear debris from roof valleys, gutters and deck corners.
- Remove debris from the yard and mow, irrigate and prune. The first 3 to 5 feet from the home should be a no-burn zone consisting of pavers, concrete or small, succulent plants. This is a good place for a sidewalk, patio or driveway to butt up against the house. From there to approximately 60 feet out is the most critical area of the

landscape where trees should be thinned and pruned, with no shrubs underneath to carry fire into their crowns. This mid-zone should be your irrigated landscape. Mowed, green grass works well, along with manicured beds of herbaceous perennials. Maintenance is key here; a plant that is maintained may be firewise, while one that is not may be a hazard. From 60 to 100 feet out, the landscape should be clean and green, with dead leaves, needles and twigs removed. There should be few trees and shrubs in this zone, and trees should be pruned. To be effective, maintenance must be done on a regular basis, depending on the type and amount of vegetation.

- Select appropriate species to grow in the home ignition zone. Evergreens and scrub oaks tend to be highly flammable, while aspen and most broad-leaved trees and shrubs are less flammable. Plants that are green and moist during the hottest, driest part of the year are best.
- The wildlands beyond 100 feet should be thinned, and brush should not be dumped there. Many people do not control the land 100 feet or more from their home, but a plan can still be in place. Contact your neighbors and talk with them about safety and what you can do together. This includes individual neighbors, but may also include government neighbors like the U.S. Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management.
- Keep firewood, construction material and other flammable items at least 30 feet from your home. Be sure propane tanks are located at least 100 feet from any structure, and clear the vegetation 10 feet around them.
- Make sure emergency personnel can easily locate and identify your home. Be sure house numbers are clearly marked and visible.
- Your driveway needs to be wide and clear so firefighters can enter in an emergency, and they will need enough overhead and turnaround space to get in and out with equipment.
- Take the time to protect your home. Homes that do not meet these minimum specifications are less likely to receive full consideration by firefighters since they pose an unnecessary risk to their safety and equipment.
- For more information on landscaping to minimize fire hazards, visit USU Extension forestry's website at forestry.usu.edu.
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