



Firewise Landscaping

by Bonni Engelhardt

CREATE DEFENSIBLE SPACE

- Reduce/modify/clear any potential fuel (materials and dead, dying and diseased vegetation) in the area around your home and other structures (as well as outlying areas) to slow the spread of fire. Remove anything remotely flammable within 5' of structures and get wild areas mown down before fire.
- Create easy access onto/within your property for emergency vehicles and for firefighters to navigate around your structures.
- Use fire-resistant building materials when possible, especially structures attached/leading to your home (fences, gates, pergolas).
- Use well-placed and spaced fire-resistant plants in your landscaping, especially within 30' of your home and other structures.
- A well-maintained lawn is often used as a fuel break between major plantings and structures. For more waterwise options, consider alternative lawns or hardscape.
- Consider your terrain – slopes, canyons and ridgetops increase the risk of fire and how rapidly it spreads. Take this into account when following guidelines, increasing precautionary measures in relationship to the % of slope.

FIREWISE PRACTICES **This is the most important part!**

- Familiarize yourself with the zones of defense and use them as a guideline for planting and maintenance.
- Irrigate regularly (appropriately for the types of plants in your landscape) during the dry season – do not over-irrigate!
- Proper pruning maintenance is essential – avoid traditional hedging/shearing practices unless called for (e.g., lavender).
- Seasonally remove dry/dead/diseased plant material from inside, around and below shrubs/trees/conifers.
- Avoid contiguous plantings and the laddering effect – create space horizontally and vertically between plants and plantings. Utilize smaller groupings, islands and hardscaping to interrupt the path of fire.
- Space plants appropriately for their mature stature – allow for 1.5 x the listed width between plants.
- Stagger trees/shrubs in larger plantings for extra space/air flow.
- Limb up large trees 6-10' when appropriate or 1/3 total height for small trees and large shrubs. Keep tree branches 10' from structures.
- Avoid invasive species, overly aggressive plants and excessive fertilizing.

- Use appropriate mulch, especially within 10' of structures. Fine compost is the best bark alternative, though inorganic materials like crushed gravel, round cobble and decomposed granite are good choices too. Bark products are acceptable in further out zones – fine, shredded bark mulch is considered a safer bet over chunkier wood chips.
- Many of these protocols help to reduce the chances of creating ember traps. Conversely, strategic plantings within the outer zone of a property and separated from structures by fuel breaks can effectively catch embers (as well as debris and weed seeds).

QUALITIES OF FIRE-RETARDANT AND FIRE-RESISTANT PLANTS

- They do not readily ignite and, therefore, don't significantly contribute to the fuel that feeds a fire
- Deciduous rather than evergreen foliage
- Produce a low amount of litter
- Leaves are moist and supple
- Succulent, fleshy leaves
- Large, broad leaves rather than needle or bladelike
- Thick instead of fine or thin leaves
- Open, uncongested branching structure that does not accumulate dead wood/dry material (leaves and other blown-in debris)
- Sap is water-like and has mild to no odor
- High mineral content in foliage/stems – soap, salt, pectin and latex

QUALITIES OF FLAMMABLE PLANTS **To be avoided within 30' of a structure**

- Tendency to accumulate dry/dead twigs, leaves or needles around and within
- Dry, brittle foliage and stems/branches
- Very dense foliage/branching habit
- Leaves, stems and branches contain volatile waxes/terpenes/oils
- Foliage is aromatic **depends on the plant – not all are quick to ignite and this is the most significant factor in deer resistance
- Sap is gummy/resinous/strongly odorous
- May have loose/shaggy/papery bark
- Large ornamental grasses with accumulated dry stalks densely packed within the crown

FIRE-RESISTANT PLANTS

Where plants are situated and how they are maintained is key! A fire-safe landscape follows the same tenets of good design – RIGHT PLANT, RIGHT PLACE. Healthy plants are more firewise than the alternative, meaning: appropriately sited, well pruned, planted at the right depth and properly irrigated. This list is just a starting point and mostly covers shrub options. Keep in mind that deciduous plants/trees are generally safe and can even shield your home from the effects of fire. Most perennials are also naturally fire resistant and are an important part of any landscape.

Evergreen

Abelia spp. (semi-evergreen) *
Agave spp. – Century Plant (hardy species) **
Arbutus unedo ‘Compacta’ – Compact Strawberry Tree
Berberis spp. (evergreen) – Evergreen Barberry **
Buxus spp. – Boxwood **
Camellia spp. *
Carpenteria californica – Bush Anemone **
Choisya ternata – Mexican Orange **
Choisya x dewitteana ‘Aztec Pearl’ – Cutleaf Mexican Orange **
Cotoneaster spp. – Bearberry *
Daphne spp. **
Distylium spp. *
Elaeagnus spp. – Silverberry *
Fatsia japonica – Japanese Aralia *
Feijoa sellowiana – Pineapple Guava *
Garrya spp. – Silk Tassel
Hypericum frondosum – (Shrubby) St. John’s Wart *
Ilex spp. – Holly *
Mahonia repens – Creeping Oregon Grape **
Myrica californica – Pacific Wax Myrtle *
Nandina domestica – Heavenly Bamboo
Osmanthus spp. – False Holly/Hardy Tea Olive **
Phlomis spp. – Jerusalem Sage **
Pieris japonica – Andromeda **
Prunus lusitanica – Portuguese Laurel *
Rhamnus californica/tomentella – CA & Hoary Coffeeberry **
Rhododendron spp. *
Teucrium fruticans – Bush Germander **
Yucca filamentosa – Adam’s Needle **

Deciduous

Amelanchier spp. - Serviceberry
Aronia spp. – Chokeberry
Berberis spp. – Barberry **
Buddleia spp. – Butterfly Bush (sterile cultivars only) *

Calycanthus occidentalis – Western Spicebush *
Caryopteris x clandonensis – Blue Mist/Beard **
Cercis occidentalis – Western Redbud
Chaenomeles speciosa – Flowering Quince (semi-evergreen) *
Cornus sericea/sanguinea – Redtwig Dogwood
Cotinus spp. – Smoke Bush
Euonymus a. ‘Compacta’ – Compact Burning Bush *
Hamamelis spp. – Witchhazel
Hibiscus syriacus – Rose of Sharon
Holodiscus discolor – Oceanspray *
Hydrangea spp.
Lagerstroemia spp. – Crepe Myrtle *
Paeonia suffruticosa – Tree Peony **
Philadelphus lewisii – Lewis’ Mock Orange
Physocarpus spp. – Ninebark
Rhamnus frangula – Tallhedge Buckthorn
Rhus spp. – Sumac *
Ribes spp. – Flowering Currant
Rosa spp. (and hybrids) – Roses
Sambucus spp. - Elderberry
Spiraea spp. *
Symphoricarpos albus – Snowberry
Syringa spp. – Lilac
Viburnum spp. (some semi-evergreen options too) *
Vitex agnes-castus – Chaste Tree **

Groundcovers

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi – Kinnickinnick *
Asarum caudatum – Wild Ginger **
Campanula p. ‘Birch Hybrid’ – Creeping Bellflower *
Ceratostigma plumbaginoides – Hardy Plumbago *
Delosperma spp. – Hardy Iceplant
Fragaria spp. – Creeping Strawberry *
Geranium cantabrigiense – Hardy Geranium/Cranesbill **
Herniaria glabra – Rupturewort *
Origanum v. ‘Compactum’ – Dwarf Greek Oregano **
Saponaria ocymoides – Rock Soapwort
Sedum spp. - Stonecrop
Teucrium chamaedrys – Creeping Germander **
Thymus spp. – Creeping Thyme **
Veronica spp. – Speedwell *

PLANTS TO USE WITH CAUTION

Avoid within 10' of structures and use as singular specimens, separated from fire-prone plants/trees. Dwarf or prostrate selections are generally safer.

Arctostaphylos spp. – Manzanita *
Callistemon spp. (hardy/alpine only) – Bottlebrush **
Ceanothus spp. – Blue Blossom/CA Lilac *
Cephalotaxus harringtonia – Japanese Plum Yew **
Cistus spp. – Rockrose *
Dwarf conifers (like Pine, Cedar, Spruce etc.) **
Euphorbia spp. – Spurge **
Lavandula spp. – Lavender **
Perovskia atriplicifolia – Russian Sage ** dwarf cultivars are best
Rosmarinus officinalis – Rosemary **

* Can be deer resistant in mild areas

** More reliably deer resistant

It is important to note that many plants become more deer resistant once established or large enough to withstand occasional/seasonal browsing.

RESOURCES

'Firescaping' 2nd edition, by Douglas Kent

www.ashlandfirewise.org

www.idahofirewise.org

www.marinmg.ucanr.edu

'Firescaping Your Home' by Adrienne Edwards and Rachel Schleiger