

Quarterly Quiz

Landscaping to Minimize Wildfire Risk

Over the last two years, 85 percent of the wildfires in Texas have occurred within two miles of a community – so it's quickly being understood that wildland fires are not just a problem for rural homeowners.

Texas, the eighth fastest growing state in the nation, is seeing many of its citizens moving to the Urban Wildland Interface – a place where urban developments – subdivisions, malls and other businesses meet natural areas – the surrounding forests and fields. With this move to and among the wildlands, new fire risks are being seen.

Caution is particularly important in the Panhandle and West Texas counties. Wildfire burned more than 60,000 acres of range or prairie land and a number of rural homes burned in early March in Hutchinson County. Landscaping can provide some strategies to help protect a home.

Keeping grassy areas mowed can go a long way in reducing the wildfire risk. When people relocate, they often bring their suburban-style lawn mower with them, according to Tom Benton, Extension Agent. Benton said. But such machines, either push mowers or small riding mowers, are just not up to keeping several acres of grass under control, he said. In the dry Panhandle climate even mowing can be dangerous, as a spark from the exhaust can ignite a dry lawn. "It's a good idea to water the lawn a little, if possible, before mowing," Benton cautions.

Foremost on the list of wildfire preventions is to clear brush, tall grass, dead landscape plants and other combustible materials from around the house. Called a "defensible space," the cleared area should be equal to one-and-a-half times the height of the home plus 30 feet. If the house is on a slope, increase the defensible zone to at least 75 feet. Fire travels 16 times faster up a slope than on level ground. Defensible space does not have to be devoid of vegetation. On the contrary, it is space that uses vegetation – specifically selected, placed, and maintained – to reduce the fire hazard rather than invite wildfire to your home. Aesthetics can be maintained even as your home's ability to survive a wildfire is increased.

It's also a good idea to move any wooden structures, such as picnic trestle tables or storage sheds as far from the house as possible, Benton added.

Other preventive steps include:

- Remove leaves, dead limbs and any other flammable plant material from the house's roof and rain gutters.
- Replace evergreen landscaping plants with less flammable hardwood species. Select trees such as oaks and maples that have open branching, which can help

retard fire spread. Avoid planting vegetation with high oil and resin content, such as pines, cedars and junipers. These types of plants burn quickly and can greatly increase the rate of fire spread.

- Select plants that are drought tolerant, high in moisture content, easily pruned and maintained.
- Plant small trees and shrubs away from larger trees to avoid creating a ladder of vegetation that could lead a ground fire up into the tree crowns.
- Plant the right tree in the right place. Avoid planting potentially large trees and shrubs under utility lines.
- Restrict the use of flowerbeds and shrubbery against your house. Nonflammable mulches such as rock or crushed brick are preferred.
- Store firewood at least 30 feet from the home.
- Thin any nearby stands of trees. (Risk can be reduced if trees are 15 to 20 feet apart and deadwood and brush is cleared from within the stand)

Another safety tip is to install outdoor faucets on all sides of the house whenever possible. However, don't rely solely on household water supply to extinguish fires. When wildfires take out electric lines, local wells stop pumping.

To make it easier for firefighters, keep the driveway accessible and the house address clearly marked.

Information on wildfire and tips for protecting homes, farms and ranches from damage by wildfire can be found on Extension's Disaster Education Network Web site at <http://texashelp.tamu.edu> . Click on "Hot Topics" and choose "Wildfire."

"While people in and near urban centers may have the advantage of a nearby fire department, they shouldn't ignore their own ability to reduce the risk of a fire on their property," said Harris, a delegate to the national Extension Disaster Education Network. The network is "intended to help all Texas citizens by sharing educational resources to reduce the impact of natural and man-made disasters for individuals, families and communities."

Information for this article was taken from Texas A&M University Ag Communications article by Robert Burns, Tom Benton, Extension agent, Hutchinson County, and the Texas Forest Service.