

## Creating a Buffer Zone from Wildfire

By Susan Camp

Wildfires in the western United States seem to grow, bigger, fiercer, and more prevalent each year. The recent fires in California and the horrific loss of life, property, and personal possessions awakened me to the realization that a wildfire could occur in Gloucester County.

We can't compare Tidewater Virginia with our high humidity, numerous waterways, and relatively low-growing trees, shrubs, and grasses with the arid, drought-prone environment of much of California, but wherever the three components of the "Fire Triangle" exist, there is a potential for fire. The three elements necessary for a fire to start are oxygen, fuel, and a heat source. The air we breathe contains oxygen; fuels abound in the rural environment; and a heat source can be a match, a lightning strike, a campfire, a barbecue grill, or a discarded cigarette. If you take away one component, the fire will go out.

Homeowners can take steps to decrease the chances of loss of life and property by assessing for wildfire risks and creating and maintaining what the University of Florida Gardening Solutions article "Firewise Landscaping" calls "defensible space", meaning a cleared area between natural grass or woodlands and your home and other structures. This buffer zone should consist of approximately 30 feet of low flammability-risk plantings that separate the house from heavily wooded areas.

Creation of defensible space should be a goal for all residents of rural and suburban communities, but not all of us have adequately prepared for the possibility of wildfire, even though grass and brush fires are reported in the county every year.

How can we create defensible spaces to protect our homes from wildfire? Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 430-300 "Virginia Firescapes" recommends developing and maintaining three landscaping zones.

Zone 1 should extend 5 feet all around the house or outbuildings, leaving no flammable material close to structures. This includes piles of leaves, brush, and other debris; stacks of firewood; and overhanging trees and shrubs. Keep heavy mulch away from the house and break up planted areas with gravel, paving, or brick walkways.

Zone 2 extends another 5 feet beyond Zone 1 and should include a maintained lawn and shrubs, groundcover, and other plantings with a low flammability risk. Plant small trees 10 to 15 feet apart in Zone 2. Prune lower limbs to 10 to 15 feet from the ground. Fire usually travels along the ground, but shrubs can serve as fire "ladders" to low-hanging tree branches.

Zone 3 extends 30 to 100 feet from the house. Keep this area clear of debris and overgrown vegetation up to 100 feet on the downhill side. Native plants are preferred.

All plants will burn under the right conditions. High flammability-risk trees, shrubs, and groundcover include plants with low moisture and high resin or oil content and narrow, needle-like leaves; in other words, all evergreens pose a potential fire risk. English and American boxwood, privet, various hollies, wax myrtle, camellia, and rhododendron are included in the

high-risk category. Deciduous hardwoods like oak, hickory, black gum, and sweetgum, with broad leaves and high moisture content, have lower flammability ratings. The VCE article contains an extensive list of flammability ratings of deciduous and evergreen trees, shrubs, groundcovers, and vines.

Right now, you probably are thinking, “Well, this is an impossible situation. I live in a pine grove, have a boxwood hedge, and raise camellias in a mulched border next to the house.”

Regular maintenance of trees and other plants will keep debris at a minimum. Encourage and work with neighbors to maintain defensible spaces.

A final piece to wildfire prevention is safe practice when burning debris or using a charcoal grill or firepit. Keep your grill or firepit at least 10 feet away from the house and in the open, not under trees or near brush. Don't use gasoline to start a fire and make sure the fire is completely extinguished before you leave it.

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