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Creating Defensible Space

It's wildfire season. For those who live in the urban/wildland interface, this is a serious concern. Homes, pets, livestock and people are all vulnerable to wildfire - but there is a way to make your home safer, not only for yourselves but for the firefighters who will be fighting the wildfires. It's called Defensible Space: creating an area around a your home where fuels and vegetation are treated, cleared or reduced to slow the spread of wildfire towards the home and to provide room for firefighters to do their jobs.

This article touches briefly on the three zones of defensible space. This is just an introduction to this important topic. Detailed information is available from Yavapai County Cooperative Extension (928-445-6590 or cals.arizona.edu/yavapai). The information in this article relies heavily on handouts from the Cooperative Extension.

Defensible Space consists of three zones:

Zone 1 is the area within 15' of the home where vegetation is managed most heavily. It is best to minimize trees, focusing instead on shrubs and herbaceous perennials. Where trees exist, remove all "ladder" fuels (eg: shrubs planted beneath the tree). Use fire-resistant plants (the Cooperative Extension has a list of fire-resistant plants). Hardscape material such as sandstone or gravel pathways can be used to separate islands of vegetation.

Zone 2 is the area of moderate fuel reduction and generally extends 100' from the home. This distance increases if the structure sits on top of a slope. In this Zone it is important to remove stressed, diseased or dead trees and shrubs. Remaining vegetation should be thinned and pruned, maintaining 10' between crowns of trees. Islands of vegetation are acceptable (groupings of trees and shrubs) but a 10' spacing should be maintained between islands.

Zone 3 is the area where the least fuel reduction is necessary and should extend at least 200' from the structure. While thinning and pruning are still important in this Zone, it is less so than in Zone 2.

Knowing the characteristics of fire-resistant vs. fire-prone plants can help you make the right plant choices for Zone 1 and Zone 2.

The moisture content of a plant is the most important factor determining its flammability. Plants that hold moisture, such as succulents, deciduous trees and shrubs, and some herbaceous perennials, are more fire-resistant.

Resin content is also very important, even if a plant is well-irrigated. For instance, conifers such as pines, junipers and cypress tend to be flammable due to their high resin content.

Generally, drought tolerant plants are fire-resistant. Plants that drop their leaves during extreme drought, such as native oaks, are more fire-resistant. Drought tolerant plants have smaller or succulent leaves.

Here are few quick and easy points to remember:

- Plants nearest your home should be fire-resistant, widely spaced and low-growing.
- Plant in islands with hardscaping or bare ground between the planting islands.
- Use a variety of plant species to help support a healthy landscape.
- Prune to remove diseased, stressed or dying plants or branches.

As mentioned above, this is just an introduction to a very important topic for those living in wildfire prone areas. To learn more contact your local fire department to schedule a fire risk assessment and pick up the publications available at the Cooperative Extension.