



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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Firescaping Landscape Design for Wildfire

Firescaping What is it? Why Bother?

Firescaping is landscape design that reduces house and property vulnerability to wildfire.

Goal

- Develop a landscape with a design and choice of plants that offers the best defensible/survivable space and enhances the property.
- There will not be a fire engine at every home
- Will the plants and landscape reduce or increase ignition risk?

Structure and property vulnerability influence design – Surround the home with things less likely to ignite and burn

- What the house is made of can determine extent of firescape design and implementation needed to increase safety
- More fuels management is required in a design for homes on hillsides, in canyons, or in the wildland/urban interface area
- Different vegetation types can require a landscape with more fuels management planning and redesign
- South and west facing slopes are drier and hotter. This influences plant choices and landscape design for wildfire safety
- What surrounds the home greatly impacts survivability

Traditional design vs the Firescape approach

- Avoid traditional evergreen foundation plantings or evergreen use within 30' of the home (defensible space)
- Plant choice, placement, and maintenance are critical elements in improving home survivability. Choose fire smart plants
- Reduce ignition sources and slow the speed of fire spread
- Consider after fire landscape recovery – Resprouters and seed sources
- Water efficiency
- Erosion control after fire
- Use of flammable native plants is reduced in the landscape and they are kept outside the defensible space zone, well-spaced to avoid ladder fuels or continuous fuel beds

What to consider in Planning?

Environmental elements – Assets, liabilities, and challenges

- Site location and terrain
- Property contours and boundaries
- Existing plant materials
- Prevailing winds and seasonal weather
- Local fire history
- Native vegetation characteristics

Fire Safety Zones

- Use hardscape (concrete, brick, asphalt), drives, walkways, patios, parking areas, areas with inorganic mulches, non-flammable fences, boulders, and rocks to create fuel breaks
- Use water features as fuel breaks and, where large enough, auxiliary water sources
- Turf and low-growing well irrigated ground covers work as fuel breaks
- Thin existing wildland plants
- Reduce fuel volume near structures
- Green stripping

Incorporate fire safety into the plan

- Create a minimum 30' defensible space zone (greater if there is a slope)
- Remove dead vegetation
- Create islands of plants with spaces between
- Reduce ladder fuels
- Lean, Clean and Green

Conclusion – Not If But When

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Helpful Hints for Trees & Shrubs in the Aftermath of Fire

Many of us understand what shock and stress can do to our bodies. Trees and shrubs experience the same catastrophic results. The most obvious is sudden death. A less obvious result of stress is an overall diminished health of trees and shrubs which allows disease or injury to follow months or years later. In any event, it is too early to determine the extent of the loss in a fire ravaged landscape.

Plants usually grow during one period of the year. Spring for many trees, including pines, is the norm. For fewer types of plants, including roses and butterfly bush, summer is the season of growth. In the months and years that follow, each plant in your landscape will, in its own time, make the final determination of whether it will live or die.

Some trees will appear green to the eye however, the heat from the fire focused on the trunk of the tree may have caused the sap or pitch to heat and reach a boiling point causing the cambium layer (the growing point under the bark) to be baked or killed. On the other side of the coin, pine trees may have had all the needles scorched leaving the tree looking dead, yet in a period of six weeks or as late as next spring, the tree may push new growth. When this happens, the tree may indeed survive or, in some cases, may collapse due to stress or as a result of an influx of an insect known as a borer.

As a nurseryman with 30 years' experience, I cannot always tell which trees will live and which will not, nor can forest service personnel. Leaving the trees in question to stand in place may be the best solution. Should a loss occur later, the dead tree can always be removed.

During this difficult waiting period, there are steps to take which will help the mature trees in your landscape through this difficult waiting period. Watering deeply once or twice a month and adding some fertilizer and other nutrients, amendments and microbes can strengthen a plant's immune system. Treating trees with Bayer Tree and Shrub, a systemic insecticide, will prevent borer attack for the next twelve months.

Many shrubs and perennials will come back from the ground. Now is the time to repair or replace your drip irrigation system and begin watering deeply but infrequently. Once or twice a week is sufficient to bring them back to life. Because these plants have no leaves, overwatering can be as catastrophic as not watering, so be careful. Again, application of fertilizer or other nutrients, amendments and microbes can strengthen these smaller plants.

Obviously dead trees should be removed as they become a breeding site for borers and a hazard.

Consult with your insurance agent regarding your specific homeowner's policy regarding home landscape loss, replacement and cleanup. In addition, consult your accountant for possible tax relief in this situation.

David Ruf

Owner, Greenhouse Garden Center