Keeping Wildfires at Bay: Firewise Landscaping

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One of the many things we love about Flagstaff is being surrounded by forests and natural landscape. We live in a ramshackle wooden house perched on the edge of a small wooded canyon, connected to McMillan Mesa and from there to Buffalo Park. Our backyard is visited by deer, coyotes, foxes, and other wild critters, and the dense ponderosas, oaks, and brush in the canyon screen out the road below. It's beautiful, but this woodsy setting comes with one major drawback: vulnerability to wildfires.

Fortunately, as gardeners, we can do a lot to lower the risk of wildfires reaching our homes and make our property easier to defend if a fire does approach. This involves three basic steps: creating a ``defensible space'' around your house, planning a landscape that slows down the spread of fire and reduces its intensity, and selecting plants that are naturally fire-resistant. This doesn't mean cutting down all trees and paving the ground with gravel. There's no need to destroy our green environment in order to save it!

A defensible space is an area around your house that allows access for firefighters and equipment, and which is relatively clear of flammable materials. This means not having dense trees and shrubs growing near the walls of your house; making sure that fences have gates that open widely enough so that firefighters can reach all parts of your property; and having open areas between surrounding woodlands and the house to keep wildfires from jumping from burning trees to decks, eaves, or house. The standard recommendation is for this defensible zone to be at least 30 feet wide.

Inside this defensible space there's still room for an attractive landscape. Just remember the three R's: removal, reduction, and replacement. First, remove obvious fire hazards. The smart place for the woodpile is at the edge of your defensible space, not up against the wall of the house. Likewise, the leaf pile and compost heap are best kept at the border of the yard, not under the eaves.

Some hazards can't be eliminated but can be reduced. We love having trees near the house for shade and beauty. But when we first moved in, many of those trees had dead limbs reaching the ground or resting on the roof. We contacted a tree guy to do some careful pruning and reduce the amount of dead timber. The entire yard was buried in years' worth of dead pine needles and leaves from the oaks and cottonwood. All that "fuel" had to go! And much as we love our

ponderosas, we had to admit that one right next to the house, with branches growing above the chimney, was a tree we could live without.

In planning a new landscape, we replaced some highly flammable plantings near the house with fire-resistant alternatives. A row of cedars across the front porch was replaced with a stone patio surrounded by garden beds filled with native plants and wildflowers. A small lawn is planted with a low-water use fescue mix. Beds near the house are watered regularly during the driest months, providing the double benefit of an attractive garden and a moist buffer zone in case a wildfire ever does sweep up the wooded hillside.

We had to fence the backyard when a puppy joined our family. Instead of the standard wooden stockade fence, we opted for brown chain link. It doesn't block our view of the trees, and won't burn. Three gates provide access to the yard from all sides; one gate is 9 feet wide, in case we ever need to let firefighters and their equipment reach the back of our property.

The good news about a firewise landscape is that the choice of suitable plants is large. An internet search for "fire resistant plants" yields numerous websites listing everything from towering shade trees to tiny groundcovers. Some fire-resistant plants found growing in Flagstaff include quaking aspen, Gambel oak, New Mexico olive, lilac, chokecherry, buffaloberry, shrubby cinquefoil, Rocky Mountain penstemon, roses, pussytoes, currants, red-osier dogwood, several varieties of ash, and many more.

Protecting your home from wildfires does not require a barren landscape or a moat! It does require you to put on your firefighter's hat and look over your property with fire prevention and defensibility in mind. Following the principles of firewise landscaping will not only improve your home's safety, but also possibly your neighbor's, and you can still have an attractive and functional garden. What more could you ask?

Check out the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension's firewise website at https://extension.arizona.edu/publication/firewise-landscapes or stop by the county extension office at 2304 N. 3rd Street to pick up brochures on the subject.

This is a condensed version of a column originally published in 2004. The author is a Master Gardener volunteer for Coconino County. Gardening Etcetera is written for the community by certified Master Gardeners of the University of Arizona's Coconino County Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program. To learn more visit https://extension.arizona.edu/programs/coconino-county-master-gardener.