

FIREWISE!!  
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Photos by Cindy Murray I: Tunnel fire on San Francisco Peaks and neighborhood east of the peaks April 19 2022

Many of us watched with horror the pictures of raging wildfires in Los Angeles County: fires that resulted in multiple deaths, destroyed whole neighborhoods, and caused billions of dollars in damages.

Here in Northern Arizona, as you well know, we can also suffer the ravages of wildfire. In Flagstaff, we live adjacent to and, for some of us, in the midst of (often) dense ponderosa forests. At the same time, we had a dry fall and have thus far had a very dry winter season. If that continues, it sets us up for increased risk of fire as the year progresses. In the face of this risk, many of us (myself included) can do much more to make our properties more “firewise.” In doing this we not only help to slow the spread of a fire should one start, but we also contribute to the success and safety of our firefighters.

A number of concepts and recommendations by the forest service direct some actions we can take.

**Create a Defensible Zone**, an area surrounding a house that is relatively free of fire-fueling material. The distance from a house that should be “lean and clean” is generally 15 – 30 feet or more from the home. The distance depends on two

things – the slope of the property and the surrounding vegetation. (For me, living in a heavily forested neighborhood, that distance is ideally 30 feet.)

***Break up Continuous Vegetation.*** Continuous vegetation contributes to wildfire risk. Rows or clumps of bushes present a greater risk than single specimens. In their natural state, ponderosa pines grow apart, with distance between their canopies, allowing them to survive smaller ground fires. There should be from 10 to 30 feet between the crowns of trees, with increased distance as the slope of the land increases. (This is a tough one in my neighborhood, but I'll start by removing the smaller ponderosas, then a few of the larger trees).

***Address Ladder Fuels:*** when grasses, shrubs, and trees or branches of trees are in close proximity, they can create a "ladder" upon which fire can climb, igniting higher and higher (and more flammable) sources of fuel. The Firewise Guide recommends pruning to have at least three times the height of the lower vegetation between it and the higher vegetation.

***Maintain Vegetation for a "Lean and Clean" space.*** To create a more defensible zone, remember the "4 R's:"

**Remove...** anything dead, like pine needles, twigs, leaves, litter, and dead branches still on trees. It's okay to leave a "duff" layer of partially decomposed material that will contribute to the health of the soil.

**Relocate ...** firewood, liquid fuel tanks, and other combustible materials (wood scraps, leaf piles, compost heaps) to an area beyond the perimeter of the defensible space.

**Reduce ...** fuel for fire by pruning trees and shrubs annually. Prune branches of trees 10-20 feet from the ground and prune any branches overhanging one's house, near power lines or within 15 feet of a chimney. Work on creating space between canopies of trees.

**Replace...** fire-prone plants with fire resistant plants. Fire resistant plants generally include annuals, vegetables, low growing plants, and plants that hold water, such as ice plants and succulents. Open perennial shrubs are superior to dense, woody shrubs; deciduous shrubs and trees are generally more fire resistant

than evergreens or conifers; native plants tend to be more fire resistant than non-native plants because of their evolved ability to retain water. The addition of non-flammable features (boulders, rock, stone) can help to add interest. (While researching for this piece, I discovered that the pyracantha shrubs near my front porch are “highly flammable”- they will have to go. More low growing perennials in my rock garden will help compensate for that loss).

It is never the wrong time of year to take action to make our properties safer from fire. The more of us who put forth the time and effort required, the more firewise our communities and neighborhoods become. We owe it not only to our families, but also our neighbors and firefighters.

*Additional detail may be found in Homeowner's Firewise Guide for Arizona.*  
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