

A homeowner's approach to fire safe landscaping

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Your home landscape can be designed to reduce the threat of fire while still providing the aesthetic, functional and creative enjoyment that meets your family's particular needs. There are a few basic steps to follow when designing your home landscape to meet both of these objectives.

Identify the Boundaries of Your Defensible Landscape and Defensible Space

The area nearest your home is called your defensible space. It should extend at least 30' around all structures and possibly more if you live on a slope or in a heavily forested area. This is the area that

needs to be designed to minimize fuel load in order to protect your home in the event of a fire. The area beyond the Defensible Space is the Defensible Landscape. This is the area that needs to be managed to significantly reduce fuel loads so that approaching fire will diminish in intensity and energy if it should reach your Defensible Space.

It is important to understand where fire is likely to come from so you can establish an adequate defensible landscape and defensible space and plan for maintaining it. Representatives from the CDF or your local fire district can help you identify the areas of your property that are most vulnerable to fire. Some risk factors

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to consider include heavy underbrush, closely spaced trees, slopes, and public roads or trails adjacent to densely vegetated areas. The plan for your Defensible Landscape and Space should include strategies for reducing or eliminating these problems. Once you have determined how much vegetation needs to be removed and in which locations, you

can start thinking about how you will design and manage your property to keep it fire safe and still provide an enjoyable, personalized, and attractive outdoor living space for your family.

Get to Know Your Property

Before you start designing your property, spend some time observing the natural dynamics of the surrounding landscape. Notice how conditions change with the time of day and the seasons. For example identify the places that are almost always sunny or shady, and where the amount of sun varies dramatically with the time of year. How does the climate affect your property? Do you get

rain, wind and snow? How much and how often? Are there places where water collects or runs off after a heavy rainfall? Are you on a well or public? How much water do you have available? Do you have erosion problems or unsightly views that need screening? Are there special views or other features that you want to protect or emphasize?

Take a look, too, at the plants growing naturally on your property. They are often the best indicators of existing conditions and provide valuable clues as to what other plants might grow well in the same locations. Get out a shovel and dig some holes to learn what your soils are like. An inexpensive soil

test kit can quickly tell you the pH of your soil and the levels of key nutrients required for plant health. While it is possible to modify certain characteristics of your landscape, it's generally a lot less expensive and less maintenance intensive to try and select plants that are suited to the existing site conditions.

Get to Know Yourself

The landscape you design will be an important part of your daily life for many years. It can be a major investment of time and money so it's important to think about how you want to interact with the landscape before you make design decisions. Start

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by making a 'wish list' of all the things you and your family hope to do outside. Remember to ask for input from everyone in the family. Will you need a turf play area? If so, how big should it be to accommodate the equipment and games you like to play? What about a garden for vegetable and flowers or fruit trees? Perhaps you like to entertain and will want an outdoor dining area. Do you have pets or livestock that need pens or a corral? Will you need a place for a shed or workshop? Also think about the general qualities that you want in your landscape. For example, do you like

lots of sun, brightly colored plants, open lawn areas, shelter from trees, seeing wildlife, shade, quiet, or the sound of water?

Do a Reality Check

Once you have your 'wish list', take stock of your resources and set your priorities. When appraising your resources remember to think about money, time, available space, and your own expertise and physical abilities. There is no point in designing a landscape that will be so expensive or labor intensive that you have no hope of being able to build or maintain it. Figure out how much money you are able to invest on your landscape in the next year, three

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years and five years. Then decide how much time and energy you are willing to devote to installing your landscape and maintaining it over time. Organize your 'wish list' so that the most important things are at the top. Estimate what it will cost to do these priority projects, how much area they will require, and associated maintenance. You will

probably find that your vision exceeds your resources. You may need to narrow down the list of priorities, scale down spaces, create multi-functional spaces and think about phasing projects over a longer period of time.

Make a Site Plan

Once you have settled on the major components for your landscape, make a simple diagram showing the structures on your property, the boundaries of the Defensible Space and Landscape, and the locations of the various design elements. Add paths and or edges as needed to make sure everything connects and you will be able to move through the landscape in

a way that reflects how you will use it.

Detailed Design

Now you are ready to start making detailed decisions about the plants, features, and materials that you will use in your landscape. When selecting plants, pick those that are well-suited to the conditions on your property, such as sun, temperature, soil, and moisture. This will help limit maintenance, and the cost and frustration of having to replant later. There are a few plants that you should avoid using because they are highly flammable. These are called pyrophytes. However, there are many hundreds of other plants to choose from that can be used in

a fire safe landscape. Just remember to follow some basic fire wise landscaping rules:

1. Keep vegetation away from structures
2. Surround beds with open areas of turf, mulch, gravel or low-growing ground covers
3. Make sure there is adequate space around young plants so that they will not threaten structures when they reach mature size
4. Maintain plants regularly to remove dead material and to reduce flammable debris
5. Emphasize non-flammable materials such as stone, masonry and metal instead of wood for built features such as retaining walls, steps, patio surfaces, gates and fences