Fire Defensible Landscaping

Landscaping around your home generally means you want to create an aesthetically pleasing surrounding for you and others to enjoy. If you live in or near wooded areas, it is important to also consider the flammability of your plantings. Flammable plant materials can increase the risk of fire.

It is possible to create a defensible space around your house. Defensible space is an area of vegetative clearance around your home and other structures that will resist the spread of fire from the nearby wooded area. Remember that fire needs fuel to burn and a continuous supply of vegetation can supply the means to carry flames from the wooded areas to your home. Defensible space also provides room for fire fighters to do their jobs.

One of the first things you need to do is remove combustible materials from around all structures. This includes ground and ladder fuels, woodpiles, solvents, building materials, etc.

- **Ladder Fuels** – fuels that provide a connection between the ground and the tree canopy, thus allowing fire to move up into the tops of trees, where it is harder to control.
- **Ground Fuels** – all combustible materials between the ground and ladder fuels such as twigs, leaves, dry grass, etc.

When landscaping, select fire retardant plants with the following habits:

a. high moisture content in the leaves
b. drought tolerance
c. non-resinous woody material (avoid conifers)
d. low volume of total vegetation
e. little or no accumulation of dead vegetation
f. open branching
g. slow growth (less frequent pruning)

Your local nurseries can assist you with proper plantings that meet these criteria. The way that plants are arranged in the landscape is actually more important than the kind of plants you use. There are four bands (or zones) of plantings used to slow approaching fire and create defensible space.

Zone 4, which is the outermost, consists of thinned native vegetation with areas of freestanding clumps of shrubs and low-growing plants or mulch in the open space.

Zone 3, closer to the dwelling, is low plants to two feet tall that burn very quickly, and offer little fuel to the fire.

Zone 2 is an area of very low growing vegetation that is reluctant to burn, such as a well-maintained lawn.

Zone 1 (adjacent to the dwelling) consists of less flammable species that present minimal risk of exploding into flames. Here it is important to note that there are flame retardant types of “bark dust” (made from shredded shingles) that can be used close to your dwelling, instead of the usual, more flammable types. Check with your supplier.

It is important to note that in this time of dwindling government budgets, many fire protection agencies use a triage structure to determine whether they can defend an area or not. In some areas of Oregon and Washington, the following criteria are used in making this determination.

“Defensible Space” Criteria		
YES	NO	**Driveway** – dead end, or longer than 200 feet
		Roof – combustible (asphalt shingles or wood)
		Roof – wood shakes
		Trees – overhang roof
		Trees/Brush – not thinned in area within 30 feet of structure
		Vehicles – parked outside within 30 feet of structure
		Slope – more than 20% anywhere within 30 feet of structure
		Slope – more than 40% anywhere within 30 feet of structure
		Deck/Stilt – not enclosed underneath (to ground)
		Power line – overhead within 30 feet of structure
		Total YES Answers
0–2 YES Does not need defending 3–5 YES Defend aggressively 6–7 YES Defend cautiously 8–10 YES WRITE OFF *This system is used to maximize the most appropriate use of resources and the safety of fire fighters and the public.*		

Be sure to check with your local fire protection agency if you have any questions.

Resources

Ranch Report, July/August 2002, Black Butte Ranch, Oregon

“Fire-Resistant Plants for Oregon Home Landscapes”, Oregon State University Extension Service, Forest Resource Note No. 6, April 2002

Creating Wildfire-Defensible Zones, by F.C. Dennis.