



GOT SPACE?? LANDSCAPING FOR BEAUTY AND FIRE SAFETY

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Why Defensible Space?

All of Nevada County and Placer County east of Roseville are in a high to extremely high fire zone. This includes the incorporated cities. According to Dr. Richard Minnich, UC fire ecologist, "The vegetation calls the shots." "It's never been within the power of humans to put out a large fire."

Make your home as safe as possible by creating defensible space. A Defensible Space of 100 feet or to the property line, around your home is required by law. The goal is to protect your home while providing a safe area for firefighters.

"The guidelines apply to any person who owns or leases any land that is covered with flammable material, and located within a State Responsibility Area."

No need to panic

Before you pick up the chain saw, sit at your view window or on your deck and really look at the vegetation and the terrain. What shrubs and trees most add to the beauty? How steep are the slopes? If a fire comes through, will it be a low-level one sparing your prize specimens?

Properties with steeper terrain and denser vegetation will require more clearing to achieve a Defensible Space.

Get out of your chair, grab a measuring tape, flagging tape, a notebook, and walk outside. Measure 30 feet from the house on all sides and stop. Turn around and look back. This is the "Lean, Clean and Green Zone." First look up to see if trees have been limbed to 10 feet from the walls, roof and chimneys. Next look down. Are there grasses, shrubs or small trees under those tall pines and oaks? The minimum vertical space between the top of a shrub and the bottom of lower tree branches is 3 times the height of the shrub. Use the flagging tape to mark the plants you intend to retain. The propane tank is usually at the edge of the 30-foot zone. No combustible materials, including fences are permitted within 10-foot of any propane tank. Underground tank installation is offered by many local propane companies.

Residents of Nevada County can call the Fire Safe Council (530) 272-1122 for a Defensible Space Advisory visit. A CAL Fire trained volunteer will help you determine how to achieve defensible space and leave you with detailed information, and a handy tool to measure the 100 foot space.

In other counties, call your local CAL FIRE office, fire department or Fire Safe Council for tips and assistance. Each county also has a Resource Conservation District that provides help in managing grass and timberlands.

Making a plan

Time to go back inside, sit by the view window again. You've flagged the plants you want to retain. What about the others? Some will need to be removed, some trimmed, some thinned to make them less dense. Write it all down. Once you cut it down, it's gone! An excellent general guide for creating defensible space has been published by the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (BOF), CDF and Fire Protection.

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Taking action: Set Priorities

The first 10 feet from the structure is number one to make lean and clean. Remove all flammable vegetation from this zone. This includes those junipers that are growing next to the foundation. If you are redesigning the landscape, consider having the walkways next to the foundation and the planted areas 3 to 4 feet away. A fire safe area can be achieved with mulches of 2 to 3 inches or low-water use, walk-on ground covers, crimson clover (*Trifolium repens*) 'Atropurpureum', common yarrow (*Achillia millefolium*), and all low-growing thymes. These will need occasional mowing to maintain a walk-on surface. Spring flowering bulbs add color to areas around the drip lines of native trees. Correct timing prevents infestation by pests. Prune conifers, especially pines, in winter, oaks and maples in the summer. Keep plantings away from the trunks of trees. In a wildfire, burning brands can come from as far away as 3 miles. These glowing embers collect against foundations, in grasses and shrubs. There now is the great danger of carrying the fire from the ground to the crowns of the trees and to structures.

Getting there is half the battle

Equally important to the defensible space around structures, is whether the firefighters are safe coming to your property. Fire personnel and their equipment will not be put in jeopardy to defend structures in a wildfire. The road and drive must be maintained in a safe manner. Is the driveway and road a 12 foot, good surface, with a 10-foot fuel modification on both sides? Is the vertical clearance 15 feet or more? Does the driveway have a proper end terminus, hammerhead or bulbous loop? Screening from the road is a desirable function for plants. Choose plants that have a low flammability rating.

A Defensible Space is not a Moonscape

Healthy native vegetation is fire wise when the correct spacing is maintained. Opening up an overgrown site brings many benefits beyond fire behavior modification.

Choose low fire rated ornamental plants and place them so as to minimize the maintenance for fire safety.

Set goals and a timeline

All the evaluation is done. You have marked the 10, 30 and 100- foot distances. You have evaluated the steepness of the terrain. You've flagged the plants to retain.

Now concentrate on the actions that make the biggest difference on your property. The 30-foot zone and the road clearance are the areas to work on first. Winter is the best time to work on fire wise clearing. Chip, haul away or burn the debris depending on the site and jurisdiction. Manage the weeds in the spring and summer. Plant spring flowering bulbs and scatter wild flower seeds in the fall. Get out your bird book and identify those new visitors that like the healthy site that you have created.

Sit on your deck and relax, knowing you have Defensible Space.

References

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