

Firewise Landscaping for Zone 1 Defensible Space

By Nancy Gilbert, Redbud Chapter Horticulture Chair and Fire Safe Council Advisor

The devastating wildfires that occurred last year in northern California, and specifically in our local area, have been a major wake-up call for home owners and land owners to get to work making our homes and properties as safe as possible from increasingly destructive wildfires. Climate change is lengthening our fire season by increasing both temperatures and wind velocities, as well as possible shifts in rain patterns.

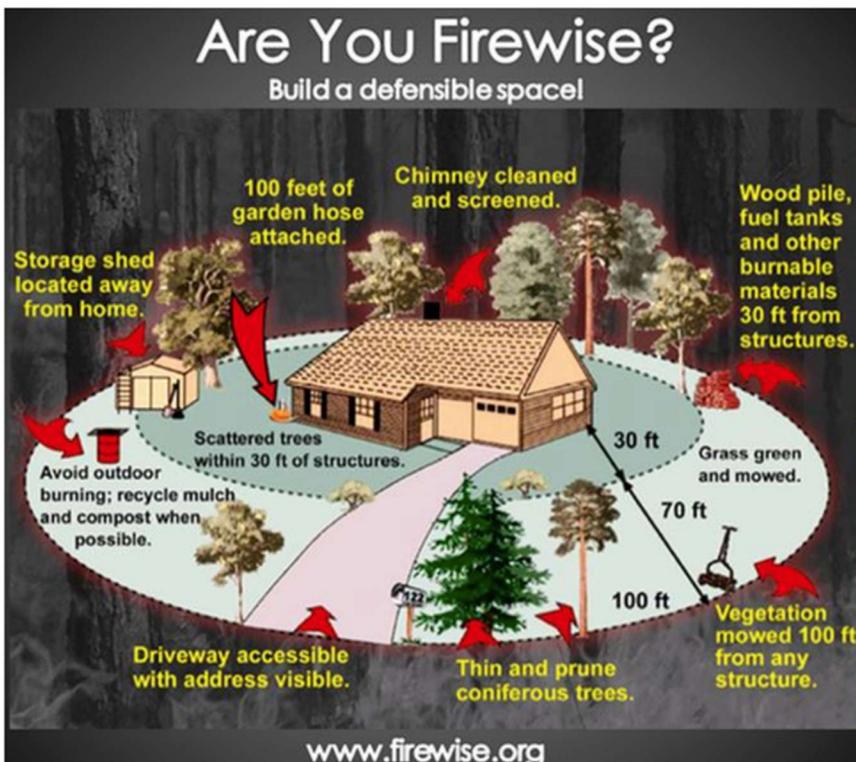
Add to this that our forests and woodlands are terribly overgrown due to wildfire suppression over the past century and the increasing home development in the suburban-wildland interface, and you have a recipe for wildfire disasters.

The Importance of Defensible Space

When you look around your home and property, you can easily feel overwhelmed by the challenge of making your home and property fire safe. So, it's important to educate yourself and develop a prioritized plan before taking actions you may later regret.

A good place to begin is to contact the Fire Safe Council of Nevada County and schedule a free "Defensible Space Advisory Visit" from a trained Fire Safe Advisor. The advisor will conduct a walkabout of your home and property with you and assess your driveway access, home construction type, fire fuels and clearances, and any other areas that need addressing. You receive a copy of the visit form that the advisor has filled out; that can help guide you in your efforts to build what is called "defensible space."

Defensible space for wildfire protection starts with defining the "zones" adjacent to your home and other flammable structures. This makes you and your home more fire safe, and also allows firefighters to more safely defend your home and property. They will not defend a home if doing so clearly endangers their lives.



Focus First on Zone 1

Zone 1 of defensible space is the area **within 30 feet** of your home. Zone 2 is the area within 100 feet of your home. Ideally you want both zones to become fire safe. But start with zone 1 and work your way outward. Also concentrate on managing the vegetation along your driveway access, so you can safely leave and fire fighters can access your property during an evacuation. The diagram "Are you Firewise?" illustrates the primary aspects for creating defensible space within these two zones. This is an idealized illustration; in our foothill forests and woodlands, we would leave more trees and shrubs than shown here, for wildlife habitat, shade, and erosion control.

I am going to focus on Zone 1 area landscaping, because this is the most critical zone and one you can start working on almost immediately. Zone 1 is the “lean, low and green” zone and, therefore, also your hydro(water) zone 1, where you will concentrate your irrigated landscaping.

This does not preclude native plants, as myriad California native plants work wonderfully in this fire-safe zone. They also have the advantage of requiring less water, fertilizer and maintenance, as well as being more attractive to pollinators and birds than most non-native plants. I have a mix of native and non-invasive, non-native plants in my zone 1, and they live harmoniously because their water, soil and sun-exposure requirements match.

Zone 1 areas are ideal for locating a small kitchen and/or herb garden, water features, and perhaps a “small” lawn, which can be composed of water-thrifty native grasses, sedges or yarrow rather than the water-guzzling bluegrass lawns of yore.

Within 8 to 10 Feet of Your Home

The 8 to 10 feet adjacent to your home must be free of all flammable materials or vegetation. One older landscape design concept that has to be turned inside out is the practice of “foundation plantings,” the practice of planting shrubs directly against the house to hide the foundation. This is anathema to firewise landscaping practices. Locate your shrub or mixed border gardens away from the house, at the 30-foot boundary of zone 1 or beyond.



Maintain this 8- to 10-foot area nearest your house free of **all** flammable material including firewood, wood and plastic fences, large shrubs and tall perennials, dry weeds and grasses, low-hanging tree branches, leaves, pine needles, and bark or wood-chip mulches. Never use mulches such as “gorilla hair,” —a finely shredded bark that is very flammable.

The areas close to your house are perfect locations for concrete, brick, paver, or gravel walkways and patios, for rock gardens and cobble-lined drainage swales, and for low-growing groundcover-type plants that are irrigated sufficiently to keep the leaves and stems hydrated.

Beyond 8 to 10 Feet but in Zone 1

Beyond this critical 8- to 10-foot most closely surrounding your house, in the rest of zone 1 you have more latitude and can include **slightly** taller landscape plants, but keep vegetation pruned low, as flames will generally be at least twice as high as the height of the vegetation.

You can mulch your planters and borders in these outer portions of zone 1 with organic as well as inorganic mulches. Remember to leave some patches of bare ground for ground-nesting bees and butterfly puddling!

Plants for Zone 1

Within zone 1, avoid both native and non-native plants that are highly aromatic, have waxy coating on the leaves, or have fine feathery foliage or flat, narrow needles, as such plants are highly flammable. Common examples of non-native plants with these qualities are Rosemary and Junipers, which are all too common in Sierra foothill home landscapes. Our strongly scented native Salvias (Sages) are wonderful garden plants, but do not plant the shrubbier and taller ones near structures or propane tanks.

Following is a list of some of our fire safe and attractive California native plants that are well-suited for planting in the zone 1 area. To learn more about these plants and for an expanded palette of native plant species for your garden, visit CNPS’s huge native plant database website: <http://calscape.cnps.org>

Some Firewise California Native Plants for Zone 1 Defensible Space in the Sierra Foothills

Botanical Name	Common Name
<i>Adiantum species</i>	Maidenhair Fern, Five-fingered Fern
<i>Aquilegia Formosa</i>	Western Columbine
<i>Arctostaphylos uva ursi</i>	Bearberry, Kinnikinnik
<i>Asarum caudatum</i>	Wild Ginger
<i>Berberis repens</i>	Creeping Barberry
<i>Carex pansa</i>	Sand Dune Sedge
<i>Carex tumulicola</i>	Foothill Sedge
<i>Ceanothus gloriosus 'Anchor Bay'</i>	Carmel Creeper
<i>Ceanothus prostratus</i>	Mahala Mat
<i>Cliriopodium douglasii</i>	Yerba Buena
<i>Dicentra Formosa</i>	Western Bleeding Heart
<i>Epilobium canuum</i>	California Fuchsia
<i>Erigeron glaucus</i>	Beach Aster
<i>Eriogonum umbellatum</i>	Sulphur Buckwheat
<i>Eriogonum grande v. rubescens</i>	Red Buckwheat
<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	Woodland Strawberry
<i>Heuchera species</i>	Alum Root
<i>Iris hartwegii and macrosiphon</i>	Hartweg's Iris, Long-Tubed iris
<i>Iris Pacific Coast Hybrids</i>	Pacific Coast Hybrid irises
<i>Lewisia cotyledon</i>	Cliff Maids
Polypodium species	Polypody Ferns
<i>Salvia sonomensis</i>	Creeping Sage
<i>Salvia spathacea</i>	Hummingbird Sage
<i>Sedum spathifolium</i>	Pacific Stonecrop

*Note: CA native bulb species and low-growing wildflowers can be inter-planted among plants from this list.

<https://yubanet.com/regional/turmoil-at-the-nevada-county-fire-safe-council/>