

Firewise Landscaping

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Conway, SC — February 3, 2009 – Low rainfall seen over the southeastern United States the past several years has led many areas to declare themselves as drought stricken. A lack of rainfall can cause many problems in the landscape from dead and damaged plants to higher water bills and dry or salty wells. One problem many residents along the coastal regions of South Carolina do not normally consider is the threat and damage a fire can cause to their landscape and home. Although we have received significant rainfall along the coast recently, winter is prime for forest fires as humidities will decrease and winds will increase with approaching storms.

As more and more development creeps into the undeveloped areas located along the Low Country of South Carolina, a new problem may emerge as these homes may be situated along forested areas subjected to fire. Fires in the forest are natural and beneficial occurrences. However, small fires in these areas that may only burn a few trees can become a disaster when development encroaches. Firewise landscaping involves creating a survivable space around your property that will make it less vulnerable to fire by selecting, placing and maintaining plants in your landscape to reduce the possibility of fire damage.

A survivable space in your landscape is an area that extends 30 feet or more from any valuable structure on your property. This space will act as a buffer to aid in stopping or slowing down a wildfire. All vegetation is a potential fuel for fire. However, a firewise landscape does not have to be barren space. The firewise concept to landscaping allows you to make decisions as to what you value and the steps you can take to reduce your risk. Homeowner action before a wildfire occurs can make a difference between a home that survives a fire and one that is damaged. Several simple things that can be done by a homeowner in the survivable space include:

- Cleaning the pine needles off of roofs and out of gutters
- Cleaning of dead needles in the landscape, including the lawn and shrubbery
- Removal of vines and shrubs from around trees that can act as a ladder fuel to take a fire to the tree tops
- On large trees, prune tree limbs so the lowest branches are 6 to 10 feet off the ground
- Remove large groupings of extremely flammable plants that are near the home
- Thin pine trees so the tree tops are 10 to 15 feet apart
- Replace flammable mulch such as pine straw with wood chips, chunky pine bark, rock or coarse gravel around plants within 5 feet of a structure
- Place firewood and propane gas tanks at least 50 feet away from any structure
- Select less flammable plants for your landscape. For a listing of plants that are adapted to a firewise landscape, contact the SC Forestry Commission or Clemson University
- Mow your turfgrass to a low height within the survivable zone
- Remove all branches within 15 feet of a chimney or rooftop

Plant selection in a firewise landscape is an important first start to help reduce the threat from wildfires. Plants that are resistant to fires will have one or more of the following characteristics:

- They will grow without accumulating a large amount of combustible material including dead branches, needles or leaves
- These plants should have an open growth habit with a low volume of total vegetation
- They are short and grow close to the ground
- They grow slowly and need little added maintenance
- They have a low sap or resin content such as hardwood
- They have a high moisture content

When designing a landscape, use a wide variety of plants. A diverse landscape is a healthier landscape. A variety of plants will be less vulnerable to insect and disease pressures which can lead to damaged plants more susceptible to fire.

Finally, plant placement can be critical in fire protection. Here are some tips:

- Keep your plants widely spaced. Fire can spread rapidly from one plant to another when placed close together
- Place your plants in small cluster or island throughout the landscape
- Do not plant vines or ornamental grass in the survivable zone. These plants are extremely flammable and fire can spread rapidly within these plantings