

Protecting Your Home from Wildfire

by Debbie Lauer and Charles Newsom, Bell County Master Gardeners

We have been blessed with some heavy rains the last couple of months. Our trees, shrubs and grasses are thriving, growing quickly, higher and thicker than in normal rain years. Coming all too soon are the hot, dry, windy days of our Texas summer. High heat, lower humidity, and wind will soon dry out all that underbrush and grasses that are now so lush from all of the rain. A couple weeks of these conditions will dry things out to the point where we will again have to worry about wildfires. Most vulnerable to wildfire are those of us who live on the edge of towns and cities or out in rural areas.

Wildfires travel quickly and can in a few minutes engulf and destroy your property. There are many things that you can do to prevent this from happening and/or to lessen the severity of damage to your home and property. The first is to make sure that you and your family are careful with fireplaces, BBQ grills, and when burning trash or brush.

Before you burn, check with local authorities to see if a permit is required or if burning is permitted at all. If it is dry and windy wait for better conditions. Don't burn household trash on the ground, do it in a barrel that is situated on gravel or rock and is a least 10 feet from any other combustible material. Be sure the barrel is vented and has mesh steel covering the vents and the top. Don't burn things like aerosol cans that can explode and always stay near your fire until it is completely out. Have tools and water available to help you smother any small ember that may escape the screen on top of the barrel such as a shovel or rake to cover the ember with dirt.

Instead of burning leaves compost them. This will give you the added advantage of some rich organic matter to add to your soil in several months. If you must burn brush, be sure to have a firebreak all the way around the pile where there is no combustible material. The larger the pile to be burned, the wider the firebreak should be. For a small to medium sized pile, the fire break should be ten to thirty feet wide. Gradually add material to the fire as it burns down, this will keep the intensity and temperature lower and reduce the possibility of embers being lifted out past the firebreak area. Again have tools and water available to prevent the fire from escaping and do not leave the fire until it is out. Monitor weather conditions if thunderstorms or strong winds are expected, wait for another day.

Despite everyone's best efforts wildfires do break out. Things that you can do around your property will help protect your home. Use fire resistant materials when building your home especially the roof, siding, and any decking and trim. Box in eaves, screen vents and screen in under porches. Do not stack things like firewood or gasoline containers under or near decks or porches. Keep combustibles well away from occupied structures on your property. Propane tanks should be well away from structures and have a valve to turn off the flow to the home in the event of a fire. The area around the propane tank needs to be kept clear of combustible material also. There should be water spigots installed on the outside of each side of the home and enough hoses attached to reach all the way around the house. Each home should have at least two entrances/exits. Be sure that the street signs and house numbers are clearly marked and visible from the road. All roads leading to the house should be at least 16 feet wide to allow access to fire trucks, cul-de-sacs should have at least a 60 foot radius for turning around and any bridges leading to the home should be able to hold a large truck (30,000 pounds). Keep tools such as rakes, shovels, buckets, and a ladder that is tall enough to reach the roof readily available.

Have a firebreak of at least 30 feet around the home; this space needs to be wider if your home is situated on the top of a hill as fire travels more quickly uphill, the steeper the hill the wider the firebreak. A green lawn provides a nice firebreak, during peak danger periods be sure to keep the lawn well watered. Shrubs should be spaced at least 15 feet apart and those near the house foundation should NOT be resinous and therefore highly flammable. Prune tree limbs so the lowest is between 6-10 feet from the ground. You should thin trees around your home so that there is at least 10-15 foot gap in between canopies to prevent fire from hopping from tree to tree. Remove brush under your trees. Make sure that there are no branches within 15-20 feet of the eaves of your house or its chimney. Keep debris such as leaves, small twigs, and pine needles off your roof. Be sure to keep up with your yard chores and remove and dead branches and debris from trees and shrubs.

When selecting vegetation for your landscape, select plants with high water content in their leaves. Don't

select plants such as pines, cedars, or tall grasses. In our area trees less fire prone are oaks, bigtooth maple, Texas persimmon, redbud, desert willow and retama. Shrubs such as nandina, agarita and Turk's cap are also fire resistant. Drought tolerant, heat resistant native plants are generally better choices. Another landscaping hint is to separate flower beds and surround them with non combustible material such as rock or gravel. Hopefully these tips will give you a good starting point to look around your property and see potential danger spots.

Bell County Master Gardeners have two trained Firewise Specialists. For further information you may contact them through the Bell County Cooperative Extension Office. The Firewise specialists provide instruction and materials to help you assess your property's fire susceptibility.