

Arizona Wildfire and the Environment Series

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
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Introduction

Fire is unpredictable. It can find the weak link in your home's fire protection scheme and gain the upper hand because of a small, overlooked or seemingly inconsequential factor. While you may not be able to accomplish all measures below, each will increase your home's, and possibly your family's, safety. Start with the easiest and least expensive actions. Begin your work closest to your house and move outward. Keep working on the more difficult items until you have completed your entire project.

Defensible Space

Defensible space is an area around a structure where fuels and vegetation are treated, cleared or reduced to slow the spread of wildfire towards the structure. It also reduces the chance of a structure fire moving from the building to the surrounding forest. Defensible space provides room for firefighters to do their jobs. Your house is more likely to withstand a wildfire if grasses, brush, trees and other common forest fuels are managed to reduce a fire's intensity.

Two factors have emerged as the primary determinants of a home's ability to survive wildfire. These are the home's roofing material and the quality of the "defensible space" surrounding it.

Use Uniform Building Code Class C or better rating fire-resistive materials, not wood or shake shingles, to roof homes in or near forests and grasslands. When your roof needs repair or replacement, do so with a fire-resistant roofing material. Check with your county building department. Some counties now restrict wood roofs or require specific classifications of roofing material.

Creating defensible space involves developing a series of management zones in which different treatments are used. See Figure 1 for a general view of the relationships among these management zones. Develop defensible space around each building on your property. Include detached garages, storage buildings, barns and other structures in your plan.

The design of your defensible space depends on several factors: size and shape of buildings, materials used in their construction, the slope of the ground on which the structures are built, surrounding topography, and sizes and types of vegetation on your property.

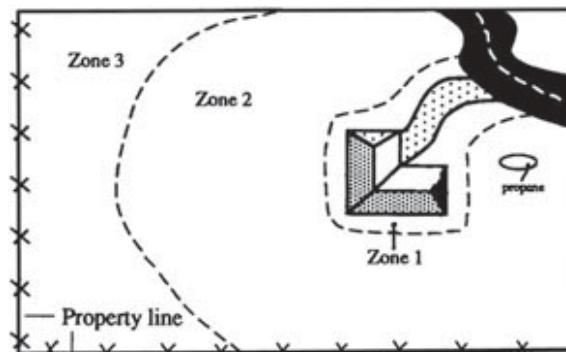


Figure 1: Forested property showing the three fire-defensible zones around a home or other structure.

Defensible Space Management Zones

Zone 1 is the area of maximum modification and treatment. It consists of an area of 15 feet around the structure in which all flammable vegetation is removed. The 15 feet is measured from the outside edge of the home's eaves and any attached structures, such as decks. The distance should be increased to 30 feet if you live in a chaparral vegetation type.

Zone 2 is an area of fuel reduction. The size of Zone 2 depends on the slope of the ground where the structure is built. Typically, the defensible space should extend at least 75 to 125 feet from the structure. See Figure 2 for the

At a Glance

- Wildfire will find the weakest links in the defense measures you have taken on your property.
- Saving your home from wildfire depends primarily on two factors: its roofing material and the quality of the "defensible space" surrounding it.
- Even small steps to protect your home and property will make them more able to withstand fire.
- Consider these measures for all areas of your property, not just the immediate vicinity of the house.

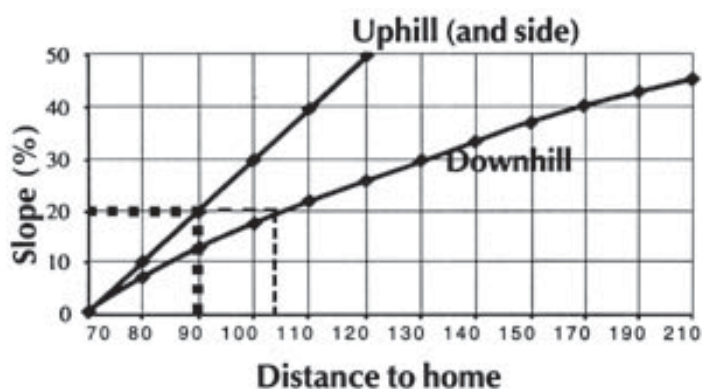


Figure 2: This chart indicates the minimum dimensions for defensible space from the home to the outer edge of Zone 2. For example, if your home is situated on a 20 percent slope, the minimum defensible space dimensions would be 90 feet uphill and to the sides of the home and 104 feet downhill from the home.

appropriate distance for your home's defensible space. Within this zone, the continuity and arrangement of vegetation is modified. Remove stressed, diseased, dead or dying trees and shrubs. Thin and prune the remaining larger trees and shrubs. Be sure to extend thinning along either side of your driveway all the way to your main access road. These actions help eliminate the continuous fuel surrounding a structure while enhancing home-site safety and the aesthetics of the property.

Zone 3 is an area of traditional forest management and is of no particular size. It extends from the edge of your defensible space to your property boundaries.

Prescriptions

Zone 1

The size of Zone 1 is 15 feet, measured from the edges of the structure. Within this zone, several specific treatments are recommended.

Plant nothing within 3 to 5 feet of the structure, particularly if the building is sided with wood, logs or other flammable materials. Decorative rock creates an attractive, easily maintained, nonflammable ground cover.

If the house has noncombustible siding, widely spaced foundation plantings of low growing shrubs or other "fire wise" plants are acceptable. Do not plant directly beneath windows or next to foundation vents. Be sure there are no areas of continuous grass adjacent to plantings in this area.

Frequently prune and maintain plants in this zone to ensure vigorous growth and a low growth habit. Remove dead branches, stems and leaves.

Do not store firewood or other combustible materials in this area. Enclose or screen decks with metal screening. Extend the gravel coverage under the decks. Do not use areas under decks for storage.

Ideally, remove all trees from Zone 1 to reduce fire hazards. If you do keep a tree, considered it part of the structure and extend the distance of the entire defensible space accordingly. Isolate the tree from any other surrounding trees. Prune it to at least 10 feet above the ground. Remove any branches that touch or interfere with the roof or are within 10 feet of the chimney. Remove all "ladder fuels" from beneath the tree. (Ladder fuels are small shrubs, trees, tree limbs and other materials that allow fire to climb into the tree crown — the branches and foliage.)

Zone 2

Zone 2 is an area of fuel reduction designed to reduce the intensity of any fire approaching your home. Follow these recommended actions in this zone.

Thin trees and large shrubs so there is at least 10 feet between crowns. Crown separation is measured from the furthest branch of one tree to the nearest branch on the next tree (Figure 3). On steep slopes, allow more space between tree crowns. Remove all ladder fuels from under these remaining trees. Carefully prune trees to a height of 10 feet.

Because Zone 2 forms an aesthetic buffer and provides a transition between zones, it is necessary to blend the requirements for Zones 1 and 3. Thin the inner portions of Zone 2 more heavily than the outer portions. Gradually increase tree density as you approach Zone 3.

Isolated shrubs may remain, provided they are not under tree crowns. Prune and maintain these plants periodically to maintain vigorous growth. Remove dead stems from trees and shrubs annually.

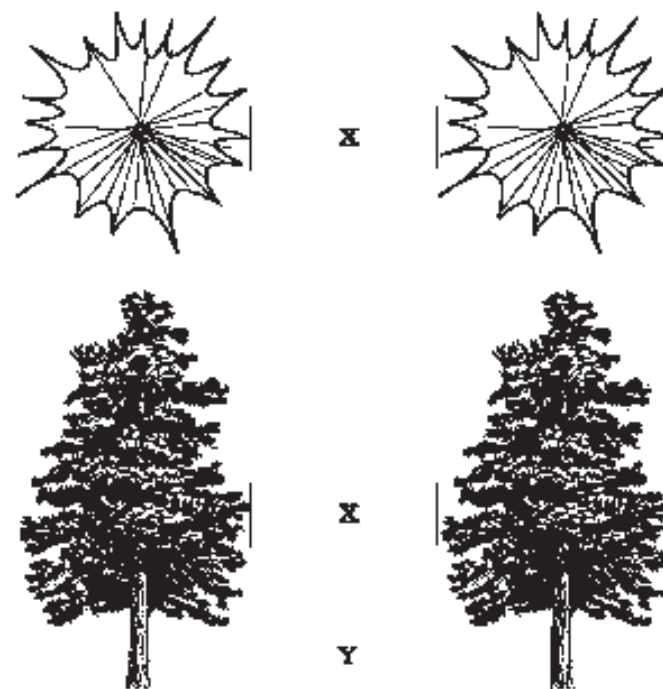


Figure 3: X = crown spacing; Y = stem spacing. Do not measure between stems for crown — measure between the edges of tree crowns.

Limit the number of dead trees (snags) retained in this area. Wildlife need only one or two snags per acre. Be sure any snags left for wildlife cannot fall onto the house or block access roads or driveways.

Mow grasses (or remove them with a weed trimmer) as needed through the growing season to keep them low, a maximum of 6 to 8 inches. This is extremely critical in the fall when grasses dry out and cure or in the spring after the snow is gone but before the plants green up.

Stack firewood and woodpiles uphill or on the same elevation as the structure but at least 30 feet away. Clear and keep away flammable vegetation within 10 feet of these woodpiles. Never stack wood against your house or on or under your deck, even in winter. Many homes have burned from a woodpile that ignited as the fire passed. Wildfires can burn at almost any time in Arizona.

Locate propane tanks at least 30 feet from any structures, preferably on the same elevation as the house. You don't want the LP container below your house — if it ignites, the fire would tend to burn uphill. On the other hand, if the tank is above your house and it develops a leak, LP gas will flow downhill into your home. Clear and keep away flammable vegetation within 10 feet of these tanks. Do not screen propane tanks with shrubs or vegetation.

Dispose of slash (limbs, branches and other woody debris) removed from your trees and shrubs through chipping or by piling and burning. Contact your local fire department or county sheriff's office for information about burning slash piles. Only if neither of these alternatives is possible, lop and scatter slash by cutting it into very small pieces and distributing it over the ground. Avoid heavy accumulations of slash. Make it lay close to the ground to speed decomposition. If desired, no more than two or three small, widely spaced brush piles may be left for wildlife purposes. Locate these towards the outer portions of your defensible space.

Zone 3

Zone 3 is of no specified size. It extends from the edge of your defensible space to your property lines. In this area, you are encouraged to manage your forests in a more traditional manner. Typical management objectives for areas surrounding homesites or subdivisions are: recreational use; aesthetics; maintain tree health and vigor; barriers for wind, noise, dust and visual intrusions; limited production of firewood, fence posts and other forest commodities; or growing Christmas trees or trees for transplanting.

Specific thinning requirements will be dictated by your objectives for your land. Thinning improves the forest stand by removing trees that are damaged, attacked by insects, infected by disease, or are of poor form or low vigor. The remaining trees will be the larger and healthier trees in the stand.

Tree spacing usually depends on the species involved and factors such as susceptibility to windthrow or damage from heavy snow loading. For most tree species a good rule of thumb for stem spacing is "diameter + 7." Measure diameter in inches at about 4 1/2 feet above the ground. Substitute feet for inches and add it to the spacing guide number for the proper species. For example, if the average tree to be left following your thinning was 8-inches in diameter, then use the formula $8 + 7 = 15$, for a spacing of 15 feet between trees as measured between tree stems. (See Figure 3).

A greater number of wildlife trees can remain in Zone 3. Make sure dead trees pose no threat to power lines or fire access roads.

While pruning is usually not necessary in Zone 3, it may be a good idea from the standpoint of personal safety to prune trees along trails and fire access roads. Or, if you prefer the aesthetics of a well-manicured forest, you might prune the entire area. In any case, pruning helps reduce ladder fuels within the tree stand, thus enhancing wildfire safety. Mowing is not necessary in Zone 3.

Any approved method of slash treatment is acceptable for this zone, including piling and burning, chipping or lop-and-scatter.

Maintaining Your Defensible Space

Your home is located in a forest that is dynamic and always changing: trees and shrubs continue to grow, plants die or are damaged, new plants begin to grow, and plants drop their leaves and needles. Like other parts of your home, defensible space requires maintenance. Use the following checklist each year to determine if additional work or maintenance is necessary.

This fact sheet is based on and draws heavily from a publication titled "Creating Wildfire-Defensible Zones" written by F.C. Dennis and produced by the Colorado State Forest Service. FIREWISE is a multi-agency program that encourages the development of defensible space and the prevention of catastrophic wildfire.

Defensible Space and FIREWISE Annual Checklist

- ☐ Trees and shrubs are properly thinned and pruned within the defensible space. Slash from the thinning is disposed of.
- ☐ Roof and gutters are clear of leaves, needles, and other debris.
- ☐ Branches overhanging the roof and chimney are removed.
- ☐ Chimney screens are in place and in good condition.
- ☐ Grass and weeds are mowed to a low height.
- ☐ An outdoor water supply is available, complete with a hose and nozzle that can reach all parts of the house.
- ☐ Fire extinguishers are checked and in working condition.
- ☐ The driveway is wide enough. The clearance of trees and branches is adequate for fire and emergency equipment. (Check with your local fire department.)
- ☐ Road signs and your name and house number are posted and easily visible.
- ☐ There is an easily accessible tool storage area with rakes, hoes, axes and shovels for use in case of fire.
- ☐ You have practiced family fire drills and your fire evacuation plan.
- ☐ Your escape routes, meeting points and other details are known and understood by all family members.
- ☐ Attic, roof, eaves and foundation vents are screened and in good condition. Stilt foundations and decks are enclosed, screened or walled up.
- ☐ Trash and debris accumulations are removed from the defensible space.

Arizona FIREWISE Communities Cooperators

University of Arizona, Northern Arizona University, Arizona State Land Department, Arizona Fire Chiefs Association, Arizona Fire Districts Association, Arizona Emergency Services Association, Arizona Planning Association, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona, National Park Service, USDA Forest Service, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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