



Fire-safe Landscapes

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Although landscapes in the East aren't as prone to fires as those in the West, by paying attention to certain garden practices you can make your landscape less prone to fires. The keys are to reduce potential fuel for fires, and to interrupt paths fires may take.

Even in eastern states, especially in hot and dry summers, having a landscape that is fire resistant can minimize fires starting through careless or accidental means. And it can help minimize a fire spreading, especially if in a neighborhood with other houses close by, should a fire begin in a building. A fire-safe landscape can increase property values, conserve water, and perhaps lower insurance rates.

Creating a fire-safe landscape isn't expensive, relying on your choices of landscape materials, and the design. It is more important "how" you plant, than "what" you plant.

- If you use wood for heating, don't store firewood next to the house or garage, even though you may be tempted due to the convenience.
- Avoid using lots of bark mulch in beds near structures. If a flower bed, plant the flowers closely so little or no mulch is needed. If a shrub bed, you can use a woven cloth landscape fabric, covered with a thin layer of mulch for aesthetics. Fine mulch burns more quickly than that in large chunks.
- Shrubs should not touch each other (this helps prevent fires spreading), and be at least three feet from the sides of home or buildings.
- Keep nearby trees pruned so they don't overhang roofs, preferably ten feet away, nor touch each other.
- If trees are over 18 feet tall, prune branches at least six feet from the ground. This will help prevent lower branches from igniting should there be a low ground fire and spreading upward-- the "fire ladder" effect. Also keep shrubs from the base of trees.
- If in a wooded area, try and keep trees and native vegetation cleared within 50 feet of the home or structures-- the "fire safe" or "defensible" space. Beyond that, it may be good to thin the vegetation by 50% the next 50 feet. This may be through uniform thinning out, or removing plants in patches while leaving others. The latter may be more useful to wildlife which shares this area.
- Having a fire-safe landscape doesn't mean bare earth! Keep trees furthest from the house, shrubs closer, and flowers or lawn nearest the house.
- Plant choice isn't as important a factor in the East as in the West, but what is important is to keep plants near buildings from drying out. This keeps them more attractive, healthy, resistant to pests and diseases, and of course less prone to burning should there be a fire. All plants will burn, but healthy ones burn much slower. You may install irrigation in this area. This could be as simple and inexpensive as a drip hose through the beds. Adding plenty of compost and peat moss to beds increases their water-holding capacity, so helps keep plants from drying out.
- Keep dead twigs pruned from shrubs and trees, and of course remove dead plants that will only dry up and create potential fuel for fires.

- Similarly, keep fallen leaves raked from under plants, especially near homes. This is especially true for evergreens and conifers such as pines and spruces, which shed many dry needles that will burn quite easily if dry!
- Keep mulch and compost piles at least 30 feet away from homes if possible. This is especially true if they are large, if a dry season, or if they contain much dry material. Turning them every few days keeps the heat from building up too much on the inside, and helps speed up the composting process.
- Use caution when using fire outside, whether this be flame weeders (definitely don't use near or on bark mulch!), grills, or smoking. If burning old grass and vegetation, do so only when safe weather conditions, and according to local laws and permits.
- Don't mow dry grass. This not only helps the grass survive, but avoids the potential for sparks from mowers to ignite dry grass and thatch.
- Don't park on lawns. This helps in many ways besides just helping the grass survive. It avoids compaction of soils, so water in heavy rains can be absorbed and not all run off, possibly straining town sewers or polluting waterways. It avoids gas and oil leaks, which will kill grass and provide potential fuel for fire.
- Keep a shovel, sand, and fire extinguisher handy, just in case.

Many western sources downplay fire-resistant plants, as any plants will burn. Some plants, though, are prone to igniting more quickly. When choosing plants for a fire-resistant landscape, select those with:

- the least seasonal (usually fall) dropping of leaves or needles for conifers
- open branching habits (they provide less fuel for fires)
- non-resinous sap (that is those without thick, sticky sap such as junipers, pines, spruces, and firs)
- less total branches and leaves (again, less fuel for fires)
- high moisture content in leaves (these burn and ignite more slowly); avoid ornamental grasses next to homes
- drought tolerance
- slow growth, so less pruning (to keep open as noted above)

Some examples of hardy, fire-resistant plants to consider for northern landscapes include:

lawns, annuals, and bulbs--all

perennials--many, including yarrow, bergenia, coreopsis, coralbells, daylilies, hosta, iris, perennial geraniums

groundcovers--ajuga, bearberry, pachysandra, creeping phlox, sedum

shrubs (deciduous)-- burning bush, mockorange, spirea, snowberry, lilac, roses, viburnums

shrubs (evergreen)--cotoneaster, Carol Mackie daphne

trees (tall)--many deciduous such as maples, beech, ash, mountain ash, willow

trees (short)-- serviceberry, birch

A home is perhaps the largest investment most make in their lifetimes. Landscape lean, clean, and green to create a fire-safe landscape.