



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

FIRE WISE AND WATER SMART

By

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A nice damp, 30 foot wide, low growing landscape is the best way to stop a wildfire. BUT WAIT! Palo Pinto County (and most of the American West) is in a terrible drought. We can no longer tolerate golf course lawns and thirsty flowers. What is a house-proud homeowner to do?

The primary goal for Firewise landscaping is to reduce the fuel available to a wildfire if one should occur in Palo Pinto County. People who are constructing a new home can arrange stone or concrete patios and driveways around the home to create the 30 foot "defensible zone". They can use concrete board to build decks and wrap the exterior of the home in stone, stucco or concrete siding. They can choose to limit tall trees to the outer perimeter of the property and they can plant islands of medium-sized trees surrounded by nonflammable borders. They can plan an attractive rainwater collection system and use drip irrigation around the perimeter of the new home.

Owners of existing homes can and should take a hard look at their landscapes. In town or out of town, trees need to be kept away from the roofs of our homes. "Ladders" of fuel need to be removed from the base of trees. That means limbs need to be trimmed up 6 to 10 feet off the ground. Understory trees and shrubs need to be moved to their own little islands away from the house and away from the large trees. Any burnable object that could be a ladder for fire should be removed from the base of a large tree (art, motorized vehicle, propane tank, firewood).

Old planting beds surrounding an existing home need to be reevaluated. If shrubs have gotten large and crowded, they need to be removed. They would be ladders for a wildfire to reach the eaves of a home. Some of the old standby "dry landscape" plants like ground-hugging juniper, yew and rosemary are not good choices for a perimeter landscape because their foliage contains volatile oils that can cause a fireball around the home in a wildfire situation. Things like salvia, earth kind roses, and skullcap tend to be less flammable. In general, smaller, airy plants, surrounded by rock mulch and watered with drip irrigation can provide some protection from fire.

Deciduous trees tend to have more water in their leaves in the summer and fewer leaves in the winter, so they are not as flammable as juniper or pine. However, fallen leaves and dead vegetation are great fuel for wildfire. So after the leaves are raked and the trees are trimmed, that material needs to be removed from the landscape. The dilemmas continue: Burn Ban means no outdoor burning of that debris; Organic material doesn't need to be filling up our landfills; piling it in the yard provides fuel for wildfire. Two possible solutions

are: 1)to haul the material to the designated dump for woody material on FM Rd 2256 in Mineral Wells or
2)create a compost bin well away from any structures on your property.

The main idea is to THINK about wildfire, KNOW that fire can happen in any part of Palo Pinto County, and DO SOMETHING large or small to protect your property.

The Palo Pinto County Agri-Life Extension Office (659-1228) can provide information on Firewise Landscaping, plant choices and installation of drip irrigation.