

Fire-Defensible Landscaping

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The dry weather in the northeast part of Wyoming is a concern for people living there and they need to be proactive to help mitigate potential fire issues. The first defense against wildfire is to create a defensible landscape around one's home. This can be achieved by removing flammable vegetation and replacing it with fire-resistant plants, spacing the plants in the yard, and clearing away dead leaves on the roof and dry brush around the home.

A defensible landscape should be at least 30 feet around the house and out to 100 feet or more in some areas. This area will also provide a safety zone for firefighters battling the flames. Many of the plants that grow naturally in an area are highly flammable during the summer and can actually "fuel" a wildfire, causing it to spread rapidly through a neighborhood. Removing flammable native vegetation and replacing it with low-growing, fire-resistant plants are one of the easiest and most effective ways to create a defensible space.

Also, the use of wide sidewalks, whether they are concrete, flagstone, or crushed stone. By having some walls made out of stone or concrete, they do not have to be very tall; a couple of feet tall and wide would typically work. Any water feature particularly a stream would help keep a fire in check, and these features also add humidity to the air. Also the placement of driveways and sprinkler systems will add to a defensible space.

Select landscape vegetation based on fire resistance and ease of maintenance as well as visual enhancement. In general, plants that grow close to the ground, have a low sap or resin content, are drought tolerant, are easily maintained and pruned, and grow without accumulating dead branches, needles, or leaves are most desirable.

To maintain their fire resistance, plants need to be watered and well cared for. Routine care and maintenance will provide an attractive defensible space against wildfire.

Also vary the height of landscape plants and give them adequate spacing. The taller the plants are, the wider apart they should be spaced. Remove overhanging limbs over the roof and any limb within 10 feet of a chimney. Work with neighbors to clear common areas between houses and prune areas of heavy vegetation that are a threat to both.

If there is a heavily wooded area on the property, remove some of the trees to decrease the fire hazard and improve growing conditions, leaving a healthy mixture of older and younger trees. Stack firewood and scrap wood piles at least 30 feet from any structure and clear away any flammable vegetation within 10 feet of these wood piles. Many homes have survived as a fire moved past only to burn later from a wood pile that ignited after the firefighters moved on to protect other homes. Check and clean the roof and gutters several times during the spring, summer, and fall to remove debris that can easily ignite from a spark.

Some possible grass selections include Blue Grama or Buffalo grass are both warm season grasses, or a native cool season grass such as Sodar Streambank Wheatgrass these grasses generally are green late into the year. Deciduous trees and shrubs typically are not as flammable as evergreens, so consider more of these closer to structures. Since most wildfires occur in the late summer or early fall, then select plants that are still green at that time of year, such as Asters, sedums, roses, Rudbeckia, Orange Carpet hummingbird trumpet, Hummingbird Mint, yarrow, to list a few. For more information, go to <http://www.uwyo.edu/barnbackyard/resources/wildfire.html>. Also each Extension Office has publications on wildfire mitigation.

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