

Creating a Fire-Wise Landscape

By Susan Camp

As a child, you probably learned the old rhyme, “March winds and April showers bring forth May flowers,” and you may still repeat those lines every spring. We have certainly felt the March winds in Gloucester this year, and have had plenty of rain, too.

Unfortunately, March winds can also spread undesirable wildfires. The strong winds that occur during late winter and the first weeks of spring, coupled with dry grasses, leaves, and other vegetation contribute to the spread of wildfires. For that reason, Gloucester County and most other communities impose an open burning ban for several weeks every spring. In Gloucester, the ban on open burning within 300 feet of woodlands or dry grass before 4:00 p.m. runs from February 15th to April 30th. You can burn debris from 4:00 p.m. to 12:00 midnight if you attend the fire. See the Gloucester County webpage “Burn Ordinance” for details and FAQ’s.

Most of us abide by the ordinance and are careful with open fires throughout the year, but the fact is that despite our diligence, fire can occur wherever the three components of the “Fire Triangle” exist: oxygen, fuel, and a heat source. The air we breathe contains oxygen; fuels abound in the rural environment; and a heat source can be a match, a lightning strike, a campfire, a barbecue grill, or a discarded cigarette. If you take away one component of the triangle, the fire will extinguish.

A home’s fire risk is determined by the “home ignition zone” of approximately 200 feet surrounding the home coupled with the construction materials used. This home ignition zone is divided into four sub-zones, which may be difficult for some homeowners to create and maintain, but will help protect your property and your family.

Maintenance of Zone 1, which extends 30 feet out from the house and deck is crucial for protection from wildfire. Remove all flammable material from around the house and outbuildings, including leaf piles, stacks of firewood, and overhanging trees and shrubs. Keep heavy mulch away from the house and break up planted areas with gravel, paving, or brick walkways.

Zone 2 encompasses another 100 feet on all sides and should include a maintained lawn and shrubs, groundcover, and other plantings with a low flammability risk. Zone 2 should have an irrigation source and provide access for emergency vehicles.

Keep Zone 3 clear of debris and overgrown vegetation 200 feet from the house. Zone 4 ideally is maintained as a natural area with highly flammable shrubs, trees, and vegetation removed or well-spaced.

Native trees, shrubs, and vegetation are preferable, but keep in mind that all plants will burn under the right conditions. Some plants have a higher flammability risk than others because of low moisture or high resin or oil content and narrow, needle-like leaves. In other words, all evergreens pose a potential fire risk. English and American boxwood, privet, various hollies, wax myrtle, camellia, and rhododendron are included in the high-risk category.

Deciduous hardwoods like oak, hickory, black gum, and sweetgum, with broad leaves and high moisture content, have lower flammability ratings.

The Virginia Department of Forestry webpage dof.virginia.gov/wildland-prescribed-fire/ offers extensive resources for protecting your home and property. The publication “Fire Adaptive Landscaping for Native Habitats and Wildlife in the Southern Coastal Plain” contains detailed information on landscape design with less flammable native trees, shrubs, perennials, vines, and ferns.

A final piece to wildfire prevention is safe practice when burning debris or using a charcoal grill or firepit. Keep your grill or firepit at least 10 feet away from the house and in the open, not under trees or near brush. Don't use gasoline to start a fire and make sure the fire is completely extinguished before you leave it.

Regular maintenance of trees and other plants will keep debris at a minimum. Encourage and work with neighbors to maintain defensible spaces and protect your property and the community from wildfire.

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