

Landscaping in Florida with Fire in Mind¹

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Fire is a powerful part of Florida's landscape. It can maintain healthy natural ecosystems (Figure 1), but can also turn a home to ashes. Florida's frequent lightning strikes and human carelessness guarantee that wildfire will continue to be a factor in both rural and suburban areas. Some homeowners may wonder if they are in danger of wildfire. Find out if you are at risk, and follow these guidelines to reduce the threat of wildfire.



Figure 1. With careful management and preparation, fire can be a positive force in maintaining Florida's native forests.
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Determine Your Risk

Two factors contribute to wildfire risk:

- **The land use in your area, and**
- **The kind of vegetation around your home.**

Surrounding Land Use

If you live in a subdivision surrounded by homes and lawns, or in an urban area, it is unlikely that a wildfire would reach your house. Like the majority of Floridians, you are at low risk of wildfire and the rest of this brochure does not apply to the safety of your home.

If you have undeveloped or wooded land near your home or surrounding your subdivision, however, you could be at some risk in the event of a wildfire.

Vegetation

Walk around outside your home and look carefully at the nearby land and vegetation. The type, size, and density of the plants determine wildfire risk. Some places may have characteristics of more than one category. Use the following criteria to assess your risk.

You Are at Low Risk If You See...

- Bare ground, improved pasture, or widely spaced grassy clumps or plants.
- Moist forest, mostly leafy trees, or mostly large trees.
- Few plants growing low to the ground.
- Oak leaves or other broad leaves covering the ground (Figure 2).

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Figure 2. Low risk landscapes are open with grass and trimmed branches.

You Are at Medium Risk If You See...

- Thick, continuous grasses, weeds, or shrubs.
- Continuous thin layer of pine needles and scattered pine trees.
- Scattered palmettos or shrubs up to 3 feet tall separated by patches of grass or sand.
- A clear view into or across the undeveloped area (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Medium risk landscapes separate ground fuels from tree branches.

You Live in a High Risk, Fire-Prone Area If You See...

- A thick bed of pine needles and lots of pine trees.
- Continuous palmettos, shrubs, or sawgrass more than 3 feet tall.
- Vines and small-to-medium trees or palms beneath taller pine trees.

- Impenetrable shrubs or young pines.
- No clear view into the undeveloped area because of dense growth (Figure 4).



Figure 4. High risk landscapes connect the ground to the canopy with vegetation.

Reducing Wildfire Risk

One of the best ways to minimize the effects of wildfire on undeveloped land is to reduce the density of the plants. This can be achieved in several ways, through both mechanical treatments and professional application of prescribed burning—a strategy that mimics fire in nature and protects the health of the ecosystem (Figure 5). Contact the Florida Forest Service (FFS) to learn more about using prescribed fire and reducing vegetative fuel loads on undeveloped land near your home (<http://www.floridaforestservice.com/wildfire/information.html> or <http://www.freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service>). In addition, you can do a variety of other things near your home to increase your protection from wildfire. Just as coastal residents prepare for hurricane season, you should prepare for Florida's springtime wildfire season.



Figure 5. Prescribed fires are managed and controlled.
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Wildfire Protection for Homes in Medium-Risk and High-Risk Areas

Make it easy for fire trucks to get to your house. Clearly label your street name and house number with noncombustible metal signs and posts. Make sure the driveway has a 15-foot clearance of vegetation, and create a 30-foot-wide defensible space around your home for fire trucks to maneuver (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Defensible space separates landscape vegetation from surrounding forests and leaves room for fire fighting equipment to maneuver.

Inside Your Defensible Space

1. Trim lower branches up to 10 feet on tall trees, remove vines from trees, and keep shrubbery away from pine trees so that a fire on the ground cannot climb up these fuel ladders to the treetops.
2. Landscape your defensible space to make it difficult for fire to spread to your house. Use shrub islands or patches of perennials rather than continuous beds of plantings. Thin trees so branches are 10 to 15 feet apart.
3. Keep combustible items like wood piles, compost piles, gas grills, gas cans, and propane tanks at least 30 feet away from your house. Clear away dead vegetation, pine needles, and branches.
4. Use mowed grass, gravel walkways, and mulched plantings near your home. Although mulch helps retain soil moisture, it must be kept moist or it can become a fuel source. Do not use thick combustible mulch beside your home's foundation.
5. Keep large, leafy, hardwood trees in your yard, particularly on the east and west sides of your house. Their shade is important to cool your house, and the flat leaves trap moisture on the ground. Large pine trees also provide good shade. Trim lower branches and rake up pine needles.

6. Remove flammable plants like saw palmetto, wax myrtle, yaupon holly, red cedar, and gallberry within 30 feet of your home. These shrubs are appropriate farther from your home and in natural areas managed with prescribed fire. They contain resins, oils, and waxes that burn readily. Many other plants are not as flammable, such as dogwood, viburnum, redbud, sycamore, magnolia, beautyberry, oaks, red maple, wild azalea, sweetgum, coontie, winged elm, black cherry, persimmon, wild plum, sugarberry, Florida soapberry, fringetree, ferns, wild olive, blue beech, hophornbeam, and sparkleberry.

Beyond Your Defensible Space

Reduce dense vegetation. Prescribed fire is best for the ecosystem, but mowing or other methods of eliminating fuels will help protect your home. Contact the FFS or Cooperative Extension office for a list of qualified burners and fuel reduction contractors in your area (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Signs that explain how prescribed fire are used to manage an ecosystem can help educate neighbors.

With your neighbors, promote the use of prescribed burning for reducing vegetation on nearby undeveloped lands and the maintenance of vegetation breaks between your properties. Be tolerant of smoke from prescribed fires. Remember, smoke from carefully planned prescribed fires is the result of reducing fuels to fire-proof your neighborhood against destructive wildfires. Call the FFS to report nearby land that has a dangerous build-up of fuels.

Additional Wildfire Protection for Homes in High-Risk Areas

How fire-proof is your home? Siding, soffit vents, and roofing should be made with heat-resistant materials. Keep the roof clear of pine needles and trim branches so they are at least 15 feet away from your roof. Make sure your chimney has a spark arrester.

If there is no hydrant system in your neighborhood, provide an emergency water supply for fire fighters, such as a swimming pool, pond, or water tank. Keep 100' of hose to stop small fires from spreading.

Do Not Wait Too Long...

People who live in high-risk rural and suburban areas of Florida should take precautions to protect their homes from fire. Since some preventive actions have economic and environmental costs, they are not appropriate for every homeowner. It is possible to keep an attractive yard that conserves energy, water, and wildlife while also protecting your home from wildfire. Additional fire protection can be gained if homeowners, local landowners, and officials work together to develop fire protection services, water sources, and defensible space for an entire community.

If you have information about a wildland fire possibly set by an arsonist, call the FFS at 1-800-342-5869. You may receive a reward up to \$5,000 for information leading to an arrest and conviction.

Use the Internet to find out more about landscaping your Florida home and reducing the risk of wildland fire.

University of Florida Websites:

Forest Management <http://www.floridaforests-service.com>

Florida Yards and Neighborhoods <http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu/>

Landscaping for Wildlife <http://www.wec.ufl.edu/extension/>

Landscaping for Energy http://livinggreen.ifas.ufl.edu/energy/landscaping_for_energy_efficiency.html

Florida and National Forest Agency Websites:

Florida Forest Service <http://www.floridaforests-service.com>

Florida Forest Protection Bureau <http://www.floridaforests-service.com/wildfire/index.html>

Firewise <http://www.firewise.org>

Smokey Bear <http://www.smokeybear.com/>

Good Fires and Visit My Forest <http://goodfires.org>

Other Organization Websites:

The Nature Conservancy—Florida Chapter
<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/florida/>

Tall Timbers Research Station <http://www.talltimbers.org/>

Southern Fire Exchange www.southernfireexchange.org