

Landscaping in Fire Country: How the right plants may reduce your risk from wildfires

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If you think living in fire country means removing every bit of vegetation around your house, think again! You can still have a lovely landscape and provide wildlife habitat while also reducing the risk of your home igniting during a wildfire.

Whether you live in the woods, by a river, in the shrub-steppe hills or in town, your yard and the space within a 30-50 foot radius of your home could be the deciding factor in whether your home survives a wildfire.

This zone is often referred to as “defensible space” or the “structure ignition zone” because it’s the critical area where potential fuel (materials or vegetation) should be watered, reduced, or cleared to create a barrier and to slow the spread of wildfire toward your home. This zone also allows room for firefighters to safely work.

There are several easy landscaping practices that can create a fuel break and help protect your home by blocking intense heat, regardless of where you live in the Methow.



While it is true that any plant will burn if fire gets hot enough, native, fire-resistant plants like this fireweed (*Chamerion angustifolium*) have moist, supple leaves and a high moisture content.

Best Practices in the 30-50 foot Structure Ignition Zone:

Maintain a non-flammable perimeter around the house: Even a small fire-free zone can make a big difference. Use concrete, gravel, or pavers to create a perimeter 1-5 feet wide (at least as wide as the eaves). This area must be kept free of needles, cones, and other debris. Keep wood chips or bark mulch at least 5 feet away from the home or other structures, and water any wood mulch within 30 feet during the summer. Well-watered annuals, and high moisture content but low-growing perennials are fine here, just be sure to remove dead leaves and stems.

Your ideal landscape is lean, clean, and green: Choose low-flammability, fire-resistant plants and accessories. Deciduous plants like serviceberry are generally fire resistant (although any plant will burn if it gets hot enough). Plants like bitterbrush, young pines or Douglas fir, and arborvitae are highly flammable and should be kept out of the 30 foot zone. Dried out wreaths, planter boxes or flammable yard-art are easy places for embers to ignite.

Water plants and trees regularly to ensure they are healthy and green, especially during the fire season. A mowed, watered, green lawn is



Rosy Pussytoes (*Antennaria rosea*) provide beautiful color and can be a good choice for the 30 foot zone near your home.

certainly a good fire break, but if you don’t want a lawn or can’t water regularly, just keep everything as low as possible and remove fuels like needles, cones, and dead leaves. You can also consider the low-maintenance xeriscaping approach with low, drought-tolerant plants, rocks and other nonflammable materials.

Keep big heat sources out of the 30 foot zone:

Your firewood is handy to have near your house in the winter, but not in the summer. Firewood, propane tanks, large wooden landscape features like railroad ties, and highly flammable plants should be farther than 30 feet from any structure. Gas cans should at least not be right next to buildings.

Wood fences that attach to the house are part of the house: Wood fences and lattice can carry fire like wicks. In lieu of replacing or removing your whole fence, it’s a good idea to at least replace the sections that are attached to the house with metal or other non-flammable fencing materials.

Choosing fire-resistant plants

Fire-resistant plants do not readily ignite, though they can be damaged or even killed by fire. Their foliage and stems do not significantly contribute as fuel and, therefore, a fire’s intensity. Even fire-resistant plants will burn if they are not well-maintained, so keep plants healthy with appropriate watering, proper pruning, etc.



Fire-resistant plants, like this mock orange (*Phildelphus lewisii*), do not readily ignite and their foliage and stems do not significantly contribute as fuel.

Plants that are fire-resistant have the following characteristics:

- Moist and supple leaves -- high moisture content in general;
- Minimal dead wood and dry, dead material tends not to accumulate within the plant;

Methow Fire-Resistant Plants

Here’s a list of some native Methow plants that, if well-maintained, are suitable for the 30 foot zone around your home. These species, and many others, provide habitat and food for birds and wildlife, and color and variety for you all while being fire-resistant!

Shrubs

Serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*)
Mock Orange (*Phildelphus lewisii*)
Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*)
native Rose bushes (*Rosa woodsia* or *Rosa nutkana*)
Blue Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* ssp. *cerulea*)
Chokecherry and Bittercherry (*Prunus virginiana* and *P. emarginata*)
Black Hawthorn (*Crataegus douglasii*)
Douglas Maple (*Acer glabrum* var. *douglasii*)
Currant species (*Ribes* ssp.)
Western and Birch-Leaved Spiraea (*Spiraea douglasii* and *S. betulifolia*)
Creeping Oregongrape (*Mahonia repens*)
Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)
Mountain boxwood (*Paxistima myrsinites*)

Flowers

Rosy Pussytoes (*Antennaria rosea*)
Penstemon species (*Penstemon* ssp.)
Lupine species (*Lupinus* ssp.)
Lance-Leaved Stonecrop (*Sedum lanceolatum*)
Red Columbine (*Aquilegia formosa*)
Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)
Fleabane aka Daisy species (*Erigeron linearis*, *E. pumilus*, *E. filifolius*)
Woolly Sunflower aka Oregon Sunshine (*Eriophyllum lanatum*)
Upland larkspur (*Delphinium nuttallianum*)
Blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*)
Fireweed (*Chamerion angustifolium*)
Western Blue Flax (*Linum lewisii*)
Purple Sage (*Salvia dorrii*)
Michaux’s mugwort (*Artemisia michauxiana*)

- Open, loose branching and generally a low volume of total vegetation;
- Not resinous, oily, or waxy--any sap is water-like and does not have a strong odor.

Many of our native plants are adapted for fire, and nearly all our deciduous trees and shrubs are fire-resistant. Ornamental and native bunch grasses that develop large amounts of dead, dry material are risky choices for the area right around the home, especially the very tall varieties.

While living in a fire-prone area like the Methow Valley presents challenges during the hot, dry months of summer, you can still have a lovely landscape and provide wildlife habitat while reducing the risk of your home igniting during a wildfire.

This article was heavily sourced from Okanogan Conservation District materials, including articles in their June 2017 and August 2014 newsletters and their “Landscaping in Fire Country” handout, as well as the Pacific Northwest Extension publication “Fire-Resistance Plants for Home Landscapes” available at: <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/prmw590>.

For a personalized Firewise plan for your home and yard, schedule a free risk assessment with the Okanogan Conservation District at 509-422-0855 or www.okanogancd.org/residents.