

# Landscaping in Florida with Fire in Mind<sup>1</sup>

Martha Monroe, Alan Long<sup>2</sup>

Fire is a powerful part of Florida's landscape. It can maintain healthy natural ecosystems, 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 rural and suburban areas (Figure 1). With the steady rise of new homes in undeveloped 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 Florida's forests.

## 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, 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. The type, size, and density of the plants determine wildfire risk. Some places may have characteristics of more than one

---

1. This document is FOR 71, one of a series of the School of Forest Resources and Conservation, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First Printed: November 1999, Date Revised: January 2001. Reviewed August 2006. This publication was produced by the University of Florida with assistance from the Florida Division of Forestry and a grant from the Advisory Council on Environmental Education of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Martha Monroe, Assistant Professor, School of Forest Resources and Conservation; Alan Long, Associate Professor, School of Forest Resources and Conservation. Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Larry Arrington, Dean

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).



**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)

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

- A thick bed of pine needles and lots of pine trees.



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

- 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, but the strategy that mimics nature and protects the health of the ecosystem is prescribed burning. Consider encouraging the use of prescribed fire on undeveloped land near your home. In the meantime,

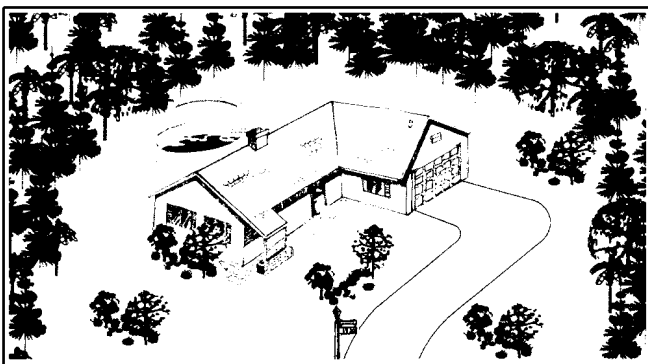
you can do a variety of other things near your home to increase your protection from wildfire. Just as coastal residents prepare for hurricane season, you should prepare for wildfire seasons (See Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Prescribed fires are managed and controlled.

## 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 metal signs and posts. Make sure the driveway has a 16-foot clearance of vegetation, and create a 30-foot-wide 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.

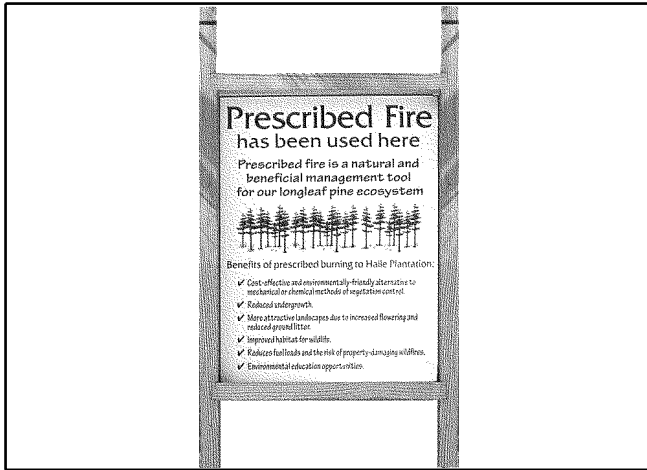
2. Landscape your defensible space to make it difficult for fire to spread to your house. Use shrub islands or patches of perennials rather than continuous beds of plantings. Thin trees so branches do not touch each other.
3. Keep combustible items like wood piles, compost piles, gas grills, gas cans, 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.

5. 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. (See note.)

### 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. Call

the Division of Forestry (DOF) 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 is 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. Call the DOF 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 don't hang over the 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.

## Don't 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. For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension office, local Division of Forestry office, or visit these web sites:

<http://flame.fl-dof.com> and  
<http://www.sfrc.ufl.edu/Extension/fireinfo.htm>

If you have information about a wild land fire possibly set by an arsonist, call the Florida Division of Forestry 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 Web Sites:

Forest Management

<http://www.sfrc.ufl.edu/Extension/fireinfo.htm>

Florida Yards and Neighborhoods

<http://hort.ufl.edu/fyn/>

Landscaping for Wildlife

<http://www.wec.ufl.edu/extension/>

Landscaping for Energy

<http://www.agen.ufl.edu/~fees/>

---

## **Florida and National Forest Agency Web**

### **Sites:**

Florida Division of Forestry

<http://www.fl-dof.com/>

Florida Forest Protection Bureau

<http://flame.fl-dof.com/>

Firewise

<http://www.firewise.org>

Smokey Bear

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

### **Other Organization Web Sites:**

The Nature Conservancy - Florida Chapter

<http://nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/florida/>

Tall Timbers Research Station

<http://www.talltimbers.org/>