

# Claunch-Pinto SWCD

## News

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT DEFENSIBLE SPACE

As the number of people living in and adjacent to wildlands grows, the likelihood of homes being threatened by wildfire also grows. A critical factor in determining whether or not a home will survive a wildfire is the type, amount, and maintenance of vegetation surrounding the house. In the 1980's, the term "defensible space" was coined to describe vegetation management practices aimed at responds to some of the commonly asked questions about defensible space.

#### WHAT IS DEFENSIBLE SPACE?

Defensible space refers to the area between a house and an oncoming wildfire where the vegetation has been modified to reduce the wildfire threat and to provide and opportunity for firefighters to effectively defend the house. Sometimes, a defensible space is simply a homeowner's properly maintained backyard.

#### WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VEGETATION AND WILDFIRE TREAT?

Many people do not view the plants growing on their property as a treat. But in terms of wildfire, what is growing adjacent to their homes can have considerable influence upon the surviv-

ability of their houses. All vegetation, including naturally occurring native plants and ornamental plants in the residential landscape, is potential wildfire fuel. If vegetation is properly modified and maintained, a wildfire can be slowed, the length of flames shortened, and the amount of heat reduced, all of which assist firefighters to defend the home against and oncoming wildfire.

#### THE FIRE DEPARTMENT IS SUPPOSED TO PROTECT MY HOUSE, SO WHY BOTHER WITH DEFENSIBLE SPACE?

Some individuals incorrectly assume that a fire engine will be parked in their drive way and firefighters will be actively defending their homes if a wildfire approaches. During a major wildfire, it is unlikely there will be enough firefighting resources available to defend every home. In these instances, firefighters will likely select homes they can safely and effectively protect. Even with adequate resources, some wildfires may be so intense that there may be little firefighters can do to prevent a house from burning. The key is to reduce fire intensity as wildfire nears the house. Consequently, the most important person in protecting a house from wildfire is not a firefighter, but the property owner. And it's the action taken by the owner before

the wildfire occurs (such as proper landscaping) that is critical.

#### DOES DEFENSIBLE SPACE REQUIRE A LOT OF BARE GROUND IN MY LANDSCAPE?

No. Unfortunately, many people have this misconception. While bare ground is certainly effective in reducing the wildfire threat, it is unnecessary and unacceptable due to appearance, soil erosion, and other reasons. Many homes have attractive, well vegetated properties that also serve as effective defensible space.

#### DOES CREATING A DEFENSIBLE SPACE REQUIRE ANY SPECIAL SKILLS OR EQUIPMENT?

No. For the most part, creating a defensible space employs routine gardening and landscape maintenance practices such as pruning, mowing, weeding, plant removal, appropriate plant selection, and irrigation. The necessary equipment consists of common tools like a chain saw, pruning saw, pruning shears, loppers, weed-eater, shovel, and rake. A chipper, compost bin, or a large rented trash dumpster may be useful in disposing of unwanted plant material.

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# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT DEFENSIBLE SPACE (CONTINUED from pg. 1)

## HOW BIG IS AN EFFECTIVE DEFENSIBLE SPACE?

Defensible space size is usually expressed as the distance from the house in which vegetation is managed to reduce the wildfire threat. The necessary distance for an effective defensible space is not the same for every one, but varies by slope and type of wildland vegetation growing near the house.

## DOES HAVING A DEFENSIBLE SPACE GUARANTEE MY HOUSE WILL SURVIVE A WILDFIRE?

No. Under extreme conditions, almost any house can burn. But having a defensible space will significantly improve the odds of your home surviving wildfire.

## WHY DOESN'T EVERYONE LIVING IN A HIGH WILDFIRE HAZARD AREA CREATE A DEFENSIBLE SPACE?

The specific reasons for not creating a defensible space are varied. Some individuals believe “it won't happen to me”. Others think the costs (time, money, effort, loss of privacy, etc.) outweigh the benefits. But some have failed to implement defensible space practices be-

cause of lack of knowledge or misconceptions.



## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN MAKING YOUR HOME DEFENSIBLE

1. **ROOF**
  - Remove dead branches overhanging your roof.
  - Remove any branches within 15 feet of your chimney.
  - Clean all dead leaves and needles from your roof and gutters. Install a roof that meets the fire resistance classification of “Class C” or better. Local jurisdictions may require a higher fire resistance rating. Check with you fire marshal.
  - Cover your chimney outlet and stovepipe with a nonflammable screen of 1/2 inch or smaller mesh.
2. **CONSTRUCTION**
  - Build your home away from ridge tops canyons and areas between high points on a ridge.
  - Build your home at least 30 feet from your property line.
  - Use fire resistant building materials.
  - Enclose the underside of balconies and above-ground decks with fire resistant materials.
  - Limit the size and number of windows in your home that face large areas of vegetation.
  - Install only dual-paned or triple-paned windows.
  - Consider sprinkler systems within the house. They may protect your home while you're away or prevent a house fire from spreading into the wildlands.
3. **LANDSCAPE**
  - See “Firescape—Fire Safe Landscape Design.”
4. **YARD**
  - Stack woodpiles at least 30 feet from all structures and clear away flammable vegetation within 10 feet of woodpiles.
  - Locate LPG tanks (butane and Propane) at least 30 feet from any structure and surround them with 10 feet of clearance.
  - Remove all stacks of construction materials, pine needles, leaves and other debris from your yard.
  - Contact your local fire department to see if open burning is allowed in your area; if so, obtain a permit before burning debris.
  - Where burn barrels are allowed, clear flammable materials at least 10 feet around the barrel; cover the open top with a non-flammable screen with mesh no larger the 1/4 inch.
5. **EMERGENCY WATER SUPPLY**
  - Maintain an emergency water supply that meets fire department standards through one of the following:
    - a community water/hydrant system
    - a cooperative emergency storage tank with neighbors
    - a minimum storage supply of 2,500 gallons on your property
  - Clearly mark all emergency water sources and notify your local fire department of their existence.
  - Create easy firefighter access to your closest emergency water source.
  - If your water comes from a well, consider
6. **ACCESS**
  - an emergency generator to operate the pump during a power failure.
  - Identify at least two exit routes from your neighborhood.
  - Construct roads that allow two way traffic.
  - Design road width, grade and curves to allow access for large emergency vehicles.
  - Construct driveways to allow large emergency equipment to reach your house.
  - Design bridges to carry heavy emergency vehicles including bulldozers carried on large trucks.
  - Post clear road signs to show traffic restrictions such as dead-end roads and long driveways have turn around areas wide enough for emergency vehicles. Construct turnouts along one way roads.
  - Clear flammable vegetation at least 10 feet from roads and five feet from driveways.
  - Cut back overhanging tree branches above roads
  - Construct fire barriers, such as greenbelts, parks, golf courses and athletic fields.
  - Make sure that your street is named or numbered, and a sign is visible posted at each street intersection.
  - Make sure that your street name and house number are not duplicated elsewhere in the county.
  - Post your house address at the beginning of your driveway, or on your house if it is easily visible from the road.

# FIRESCAPE—FIRE SAFE LANDSCAPE DESIGN

“When a wildfire comes through your neighborhood, could your house survive on its own?” A dramatic question, but one we need to consider when living in an environment where wildfire is a common occurrence. Firescaping is landscape design that reduces house and property vulnerability to wildfire. The goal is to develop a landscape whose design and choice of plants offers the best fire protection and enhances the property. The ideal is to surround the house with things that are less likely to burn. It is imperative that when building homes in wildfire-prone areas that fire safety be a major factor in landscape design. Appropriate manipulation of the landscape can make a significant contribution towards wildfire survival.

Firescape integrates traditional landscape functions and needs into a design that reduces the threat from wildfire. It need not look much different than a traditional design. In addition to meeting a homeowner’s aesthetic desires and functional needs such as entertaining, playing, storage, erosion control, - firescape also includes vegetation modification techniques, planting for fire safety, defensible space principles and use of fire safety zones.

There are three things which determine wildfire intensity: topography, weather and vegetation. Of these, we can only affect vegetation. Through proper plant selection, placement and maintenance, we can diminish the possibility of ignition, lower fire intensity, and reduce how quickly a fire spreads. This will increase a home’s survivability.

In firescaping, plant selection is primarily determined by a plan’s ability to reduce the wildfire threat. Other considerations may be important such as appearance, ability to hold the

soil in place, and wildlife habitat value. The traditional foundation planting of junipers is not a viable solution firescape design. Minimize use of evergreen shrubs and trees within 30 feet of a structure, because junipers, other conifers and broad leaf evergreens contain oils, resins and waxes that make these plants burn with great intensity. Use ornamental grasses and berries sparingly because they also can be highly flammable. Chose “fire smart” plants. These are plants with a high moisture content. They are low growing. Their stems and leaves are not resinous, oily or waxy. Deciduous trees are generally more fire resistant than evergreens because they have a higher moisture content when in leaf, but a lower fuel volume when dormant.

Placement and maintenance of trees and shrubs is as important as actual plant selection. When planning tree placement in the landscape, remember their size at maturity. Keep tree limbs at least 15 feet from chimneys, power lines and structures. Specimen trees can be used near a structure if pruned properly and well irrigated.

Firescape design uses driveways, lawns, walkways, patios, parking areas, areas with inorganic mulches, and fences constructed of nonflammable materials such as rock, brick or cement to reduce fuel loads and create fuel breaks. Fuel breaks are a vital component in every firescape design. Water features, pools, ponds or streams can also be fuel breaks. Areas where wildland vegetation has been thinned or replaced with less flammable plants are the traditional fuelbreak. Remember, while bare ground is effective from the wildfire viewpoint, it is not promoted as a firescape element due to aesthetic, soil erosion, and other concerns.

A home located on a brushy

site above a south or west facing slope will require more extensive wildfire safety landscape planning than a house situated on a flat lot with little vegetation around it. Boulders and rocks become fire retardant elements in design. Whether or not a site can be irrigated will greatly influence location of hardscape (concrete, asphalt, wood decks, etc.), plant selection and placement. Prevailing winds, seasonal weather, local fire history, and characteristics of native vegetation surrounding the site are additional important considerations.

The area closest to a structure out to 30 ft will be the highest water use area in the fire safe landscape. This is an area where highly flammable fuels are kept to a minimum and plants are kept green throughout the fire season. Use well-irrigated perennials here. Another choice is low growing or non-woody deciduous plants. Lawn is soothing visually, and is also practical as a wildfire safety feature. Rock mulches are good choices. Patios, masonry or rock planters are excellent fuel breaks and increase wildfire safety. Be creative with boulders, riprap dry streambeds and sculptural inorganic elements.

When designing a landscape for fire safety remember less is better. Simplify visual lines and groupings. A firesafe landscape lets plants and garden elements reveal their innate beauty by leaving space between plants and groups of plants. In firescaping, the open spaces are more important than the plants.

Lawn can be an effective firescape. But extensive areas of turfgrass may not be right for everyone. Some good alternatives include clover, ground covers, and conservation grasses that are kept green during the fire season through irrigation.



*“Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.”*

**Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, 1949***



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## Claunch-Pinto Soil and Water Conservation District and Torrance County Community Wildfire Protection Plans

### Claunch-Pinto Soil and Water Conservation District and Torrance County Community Wildfire Protection Plans

Claunch Pinto SWCD (CPSWCD), Torrance County (County) and SWCA Environmental Consultants, based out of Albuquerque, have for the last 6 months been leading a community-based planning process to address wildfire concerns and wildfire prevention strategies both in the County and lands encompassed within CPSWCD. This collaborative planning effort is known as a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The purpose of a CWPP is to identify key areas at risk of wildfire, as well as critical areas with great significance for local community values and economies that can be prioritized for protection against wildfires. This is a collaborative planning process aimed at bringing community members, fire management and emergency response

professionals, land and resource management agencies, and local stakeholders to the same table to discuss all parties' needs and concerns in relation to fire prevention strategies, and to build public awareness and education.

The CWPP process was established in 2003 through the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA), and monies supporting the plans were granted through the New Mexico Association of Counties and New Mexico State Forestry Division. A CWPP for both the County and CPSWCD will make landowners eligible for Federal funds to reduce wildfire hazards in the forests, grasslands and shrublands that surround communities and increase local emergency response capabilities for wildland fires.

The plan is developed under Core Team direction but public participation and input is critical to the process. Two public meetings have been held to date, but three additional meetings are planned in

order for homeowners to ensure their voices are heard. Please attend one of these upcoming meetings to provide your valuable insights on the plan:

#### Public Meeting Times & Places

Corona Community Center—  
March 17th, 2008 6:30 pm

Moriarty Community Center—  
April 2nd, 2008 6:30 pm

Torreon Community Center—  
April 3rd, 2008 6:30 pm



CWPP Public meeting in Mountainair—December 10th 2007



CWPP Public meeting in Mountainair—December 10th 2007