



By *Barbara Elmore, HCMG*

Wildfire Wisdom for Homeowners

A homeowner in the Oak Hill community now knows that his metal fence provided the buffer between a fire that destroyed other Oak Hill homes in April, and his own home, which survived the flames. He also discovered that when he removed cedar trees and raised the canopy on other trees near his home, he increased the chances of saving his home from fire.

At the time, he cleared and cut the trees for looks, and to give him a better view of the surrounding Hill Country. Only after the fire did he learn that his actions had created a defensible space around his home. Meanwhile, two of his neighbors lost their homes to the wildfire.

Texas Forest Service defines "defensible space" as the buffer between nature and a structure. Homeowners can create these areas by removing weeds, brush, leaves, other vegetation and flammable junk to keep flames away and reduce the risks from flying embers.

The story of the homeowner who did the right thing without knowing it illustrates the simple steps homeowners can take to protect themselves from wildfires, which are inevitable and often uncontrollable. Swept by winds and fueled by vegetation, wildfires spread rapidly, especially during droughts, and especially in areas that were previously unpopulated but now contain homes built and gardened by residents who never thought about the threat of fires.

At a Blanco County Conservation Expo last September, Justice Jones of the Texas Forest Service noted that people cause 94 percent of wildfires through such actions as setting off fireworks, burning debris, smoking, leaving lighters and matches in places where children can find them, and neglecting to douse campfires. Many times there are more fires than firefighters, he said, although firefighters save many homes.

Fire prevention experts offer these 10 actions that gardeners and homeowners can follow to help protect their homes from wildfires:



1. Remove brush from around your home and outbuildings.
2. Create a defensible space of at least 30 feet around your home.
3. Look at retaining walls, fences, sidewalks and driveways as "fuel breaks." Understand that the wooden privacy fence you prize may be fuel for a fire.
4. When planting around your home, use fire-resistant plants — those that do not have high-resin content.
5. Space trees 10 to 15 feet apart at the crown, and prune up to 5 feet.
6. Keep tree branches away from the eaves of your home.
7. If you are building a new home or outbuilding, use fire-resistant siding, asphalt composite, tile and/or metal. If you are remodeling, consider fire-retardant materials.
8. Screen vents, attics and other areas to keep out embers.
9. If you live in a rural area and use propane, make sure the tank is located away from the house.
10. Place connected garden hoses on all sides of your home for emergency use.

The Forest Service says there are two crucial factors in vegetation recovery after a fire: rain and rest. If the area does not receive precipitation, plants will not grow, whether burned or not. Ranchers should wait six months to a year after a fire to allow grazing on a burned property. Rains help burned areas recover, and reseedling is rarely necessary.