

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

ABOUT DEFENSIBLE SPACE



WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VEGETATION AND WILDFIRE THREAT?

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 a home against an oncoming wildfire.

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

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. This can be accomplished by reducing the amount of flammable vegetation surrounding a home. The action taken by the owner before the wildfire occurs (such as proper landscaping) is critical.

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

No. Unfortunately that is a common misconception. While bare ground may be effective in reducing the wildfire threat, it lacks in appearance and may cause soil erosion. Landscaping can be designed to create an attractive well-vegetated property that also provides effective defensible space for homes.

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 a rake. A chipper, compost bin or a large rented trash dumpster may be useful in disposing of unwanted plant material.

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 everyone, but varies by slope and type of wildland vegetation growing near a house. See the section entitled “Creating An Effective Defensible Space” on page 8 for specific information.

DOES DEFENSIBLE SPACE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Yes. Investigations of homes threatened by wildfire indicate that houses with an effective defensible space are much more likely to survive a wildfire. Furthermore, homes with both an effective defensible space and a nonflammable roof (composition shingles, tile, metal, etc.) are many times more likely to survive a wildfire than those without defensible space and flammable roofs (wood shakes or shingles). These conditions give firefighters the opportunity to effectively and safely defend a home.

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 a 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. Many individuals believe "It won't happen to me." Others think the costs (time, money, effort, loss of privacy, etc.) outweigh the benefits. And some have failed to implement defensible space practices because of lack of knowledge or misconceptions.

HOW BIG IS AN EFFECTIVE DEFENSIBLE SPACE?

The size of the defensible space area is usually expressed as a distance extending outward from the sides of a house. This distance

varies by the type of wildland vegetation growing near a house and steepness of the terrain.

CAL FIRE (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection) and many local fire agencies recommend or require creating at least 100 feet of Defensible Space around your home (see Back Cover). Clear a "Lean, Clean and Green Zone" of 30 feet immediately surrounding your home. This area requires the greatest reduction in flammable vegetation. The fuel reduction in the remaining 70 feet (or to your property line) will depend on the steepness of your property and the vegetation.

If the recommended defensible space goes beyond your property boundaries, contact the adjacent property owner and work cooperatively on creating a defensible space. The effectiveness of defensible space increases when multiple property owners work together. The local assessor's office can provide assistance if the owners of adjacent properties are

unknown. Do not work on someone else's property without their permission.

Temporarily mark the recommended distance with flagging or strips of cloth tied to shrubs, trees, or stakes around your home. This is your defensible space area.

HOW DO I CHANGE THE VEGETATION ON MY PROPERTY TO REDUCE THE WILDFIRE THREAT?

The objective of defensible space is to reduce the wildfire threat to a home by changing the characteristics of the adjacent vegetation. Defensible space practices include:

- Increasing the moisture content of vegetation.
- Decreasing the amount of flammable vegetation.
- Shortening plant height.
- Altering the arrangement of plants.

This is accomplished through the "Three R's of Defensible Space" (see chart below).

THE THREE R'S OF DEFENSIBLE SPACE	
Removal	This technique involves the elimination of entire plants, particularly trees and shrubs, from the site. Examples of removal would be the cutting down of a dead tree or the cutting out of a flammable shrub.
Reduction	The removal of plant parts, such as branches or leaves, constitute reduction. Examples of reduction are pruning dead wood from a shrub, removing low tree branches, and mowing dried grass.
Replacement	Replacement is the substitution of less flammable plants for more hazardous vegetation. For example, removal of a dense stand of flammable shrubs and planting an irrigated, well maintained flower bed would be a type of replacement.