Firewise Landscaping

Wildfire is a risk in Florida anytime, but dry periods make fires even more likely, especially in wooded or rural areas. It’s not hard to make your landscape less vulnerable to fire. Firewise landscaping incorporates fire safety into landscape design to help ensure your home is safe even when a fire comes close.

Defensible Space
Creating an area of “defensible space” is one of the most important actions you can take to lessen the risk of wildfire to your home. Defensible space is a special area between natural areas (like woodlands) and your home. This space breaks up the continuity of plants, giving the house a better chance of surviving if fire comes near.

Your defensible space should extend from your house outward at least 30 feet, and it should be filled with plants that are low in flammability (firewise plants). These plants can help reduce the likelihood that a fire will jump from wooded areas to your house.

Firewise Plants
Lightweight fuels, such as leaves and small branches, generally ignite easily and burn rapidly. Plants with thick, succulent leaves—such as cacti, aloe, and century plants—usually maintain high leaf moisture content and take longer to ignite.

Small, needle-like leaves, like those on pines and cedars, are usually more flammable than wide, flat leaves, such as those on maples, oaks, and hickories. (The broad fronds of palms are exceptions to this rule, as they tend to have a relatively high flammability.)

Plant Placement and Maintenance
Most wildfires spread horizontally through materials that lie on or are within a few feet of the ground. But shrubs, vines, and small trees can act as ladders that carry flames from the ground to treetops. To prevent this from happening should a wildfire approach your house, prune the lower branches of trees up to 10 feet off the ground.

Keep tall trees away from the home and use short shrubs in foundation plantings. Groups of plantings should be separated by nonflammable areas, such as gravel, stepping stone pathways, or a well-maintained and healthy lawn. If you use mulch, try to limit it to the area of landscape outside of the defensible space, as mulches can be flammable.

To keep your landscape firewise, keep up with routine maintenance: don’t delay necessary pruning and irrigation, and remove dead leaves, branches, and plants from your property.

For a firewise landscape, remember: vegetation that’s overgrown, continuous, and close to a home may improve wildlife habitat or conserve energy, but it also increases the home’s vulnerability to wildfire.