

# Fight fires with appropriate landscaping

By Kym Pokorny  
Correspondent

CORVALLIS – Drawing a line around the house with fire-resistant landscapes can mean the difference between a home consumed by flames and one left standing.

“Fire specialists often show pictures of houses where people took adequate precautions,” said Brad Withrow-Robinson, forester with Oregon State University’s Extension Service. “I’ve seen lots of photos of land charred all around and a house left standing in the middle because the owners created a fire-resistant space next to it. Not always, but often.”

It’s fire season again, and people who live in rural areas or on rural-urban boundaries throughout the state need to exercise caution.

People should create and maintain “defensible space” around their homes. Among other things, these areas should be free from brush, debris and firewood, have irrigated zones near the house and use fire-resistant plants.

“No plant is fire-proof,” said Brooke Edmunds, a horticulturist with OSU’s Extension Service, “but some

are considered fire resistant.”

In general, these are plants with more supple leaves without a waxy or resinous surface. Such plants don’t readily ignite. They may be damaged or even killed by fire, but their foliage and stems don’t significantly contribute to a fire’s intensity, said Amy Jo Detweiler, an OSU Extension horticulturist. In essence, they can create a living wall that reduces and blocks intense heat. However, she stressed that fire-resistant plants will burn if not watered and pruned properly.

Some plants to consider include:

**Carnation (Dianthus):** An evergreen ground cover that grows to about 6 to 9 inches tall and 15 inches wide, has pink flowers that appear in June and July and is hardy in Zones 3-9. It takes partial to full sun, attracts birds and butterflies and grows well in rock gardens.

**Tickseed (Coreopsis):** A perennial with yellow, orange, maroon or red flowers that bloom from March through November if kept deadheaded. The blossoms entice butterflies and the seeds are attractive to birds. Grow in part to full sun in

well-drained soil. Hardy in Zones 3-9.

**Delphinium:** A perennial that prefers well-drained soil and grows upright to 2 feet and gets 18 to 36 inches wide. The blue, pink, purple or white flowers bloom in March and April. Delphiniums take partial to full sun and need well-drained soil. Hardy in Zones 5-9.

**Daphne (D. x burkwoodii):** A 3- to 5-foot, semi-evergreen shrub with highly fragrant white to pink flowers that bloom in May and June and attract butterflies. This plant needs partial shade and well-drained soil with a neutral pH. Hardy in Zones 4-8.

**Black oak (Quercus velutina):** A deciduous tree with a spreading crown and good fall color. Grows 50 to 60 feet tall and wide. The diminutive

flowers in March through May appeal to birds and butterflies. Acorns attract wildlife. Grows in full sun and is drought tolerant. Hardy in Zones 3-9.

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— Brooke Edmunds

More information is available in the 48-page guide, *Fire-resistant Plants for Home Landscape*, written by Detweiler and Stephen Fitzgerald, an Extension forester, and produced in collaboration with Washington State University and Idaho State University. It highlights

plants appropriate for all areas of the Northwest.

In addition to planting fire-resistant plants, Edmunds recommends the following precautions:

- Move plants, especially flammable ones, away from the house.
- Clean up dead brush and debris and move firewood away from buildings.
- Trim trees and shrubs to keep them 10 feet apart.
- Use non-flammable mulch such as rocks near structures.
- Have irrigated zones around the home’s perimeter.
- Remove debris from roofs and gutters.
- Remove lawn close to the house or keep it closely cropped and watered.
- Keep potted plants well irrigated.

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