

*Maintaining Defensible Space***Is your defensible space alarm clock ringing?**

BY SANDY SHAFFER



When the Applegate Fire Plan was written in 2002, developing “defensible space” was one of our primary objectives. Many residents contacted Fire District #9 or the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) for a home inspection and thinned out vegetation within 100 feet of their homes to make them more fire-safe in 2002 and 2003. When did you do *your* work? Is *your* defensible space alarm clock ringing? Depending upon what type of vegetation you have growing around your home, it may be time to do some maintenance work right now, before this summer’s Fire Season!

For new residents: Creating defensible space consists of thinning out vegetation that can carry fire or burning embers to your home. This usually is outward at least 100 feet from the house, depending upon slope and vegetation. Things we usually look at include:

- ladder fuels (that can allow surface fire to move up into tree crowns)
- tree crown spacing (so that a fire doesn’t spread from tree to tree as quickly)
- continuous fuels (that lead right up to your home’s siding, outbuildings, decking, vehicles and other hazards such as propane tanks)
- access and egress (thinned vegetation along your driveway can make a wider fuel break and allow fire vehicles to get to your home)
- fuels in contact with the home (trees overhanging the roofline, near a chimney, underneath windows)
- home-building materials and condition

Every homesite is different, so it is important that you have your local fire district or someone from the ODF come out and assess your home’s defensible space needs! (You also can find more information on *Defensible Space and the Home Ignition Zone* at <http://rvjpc.com> or <http://firewise.org>.)

Defensible space maintenance:

Initial thinning around your home can be a *big* task, but once you’ve done this, it doesn’t take more than a few hours of work each spring to maintain your defensible space! (Isn’t that a small price to pay for a more fire-safe home?) If you’ve been doing annual maintenance, you know. Raking fall leaves, spring and early summer mowing, and some light pruning might be all you need. But if you’ve let things go a few years, here are some tips and a step-by-step way to simplify the process.

Tip: Get to know the characteristics of your native trees. Most have favored aspects; for example, fir trees like a cooler northern exposure, while oaks love the sunny south. What direction does *your* homesite face?

Oaks, madrone, alder and big-leaf maple will resprout for years after cutting, so you continually have to cut down the new shoots, which have become ladder fuels. (This is something that you can use as a management tool—knowing that you can have a healthy young tree sprout up in a few years! [*photo 1*]). However, conifers (fir, pine and cedar) do not resprout when cut. And did you know that the hardwoods have been known to slow down a crown fire because they hold moisture in their leaves and have fewer oils than conifers? So having a mixed-variety forest is a *good* thing.

Tip: Ladder fuels can be tough to figure out (*photo 2*), but knowing a little about how and why plants burn can help. A general rule of thumb is that flames from plant materials could be about three times the height of the plant. So, six-inch tall grass could produce up to 18-inch tall flames, and a three-foot shrub could throw flames nine feet into the air!

Tip: Use fire-resistant plants in your landscaping—they don’t readily ignite from a flame or embers, so won’t significantly contribute to the spread of fire near your house. The physical characteristics of a plant make them fire-resistant: moist supple leaves, little dead wood or needles within the plant, sap is water-like, not thick

and resinous. (For more information on fire-resistant plants, including flowers, land covers, shrubs and trees, go to <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/describes/> or <http://rvjpc.com>.)

Tip: Your home’s survivability during a wildfire could depend upon summer weather patterns! Do you know if afternoon prevailing winds affect your homesite or property? Find out, and then take more care in thinning outward from your home in that direction to try and decrease a potential fire’s spread.

Tip: Your access route could make the difference as to whether your home survives a wildfire. Once you’ve thinned per your fire inspector’s recommendations,



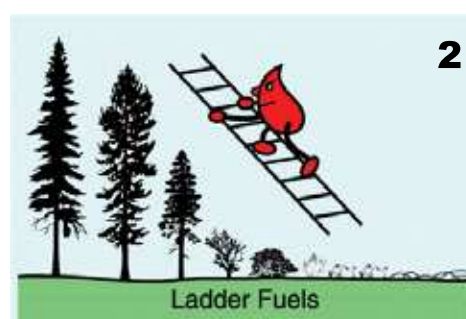
walk the driveway *each spring* looking for ladder fuels and branches that have begun to infringe on your access route’s fuel break, and trim them back. (*photo 3*). And clean up thick accumulations of dry leaves along the roadbed to prevent spot fires.

Tip: Do you have a reflective address sign at the street and at *every* split in your driveway? Reflective signs will

show up at night or when visibility is low (*photo 4*). Make sure your signs are well-placed and visible! (This also could mean valuable minutes saved in a life-threatening emergency!) The first address sign is free from Fire District #9.

Tip: Maintaining your defensible space *isn’t* just about vegetation—it also includes general cleanup around your homesite, removing debris and trash, repairing damaged roofing, etc. It’s *easier to catch everything* if you follow a routine, looking at your property at several *scales* and *heights* rather than the front, side or back yards. An assessment system of *five simple steps* (or *zones*) has been developed by wildfire behavior experts to measure a home’s ignitability and fire preparedness, and I think they also work very well when considering what maintenance you need to do on your defensible space. Below I’ve listed the five zones and then applied things to look for within each one during an *annual maintenance check*. (Note: *this approach is not*

See DEFENSIBLE, page 13



The concept of “ladder fuels.”

