

The Garden and Landscape in a Time of Drought and Fire
By Susan Carter

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ColoradoMountainGardener.blogspot.com/2020/08/*

This morning I awoke here in Fruita to find most of my garden covered in ash from the Pine Gulch Fire, currently about 12 miles north of here [on August 28]. It is amazing how far ash travels. By the time I was done hosing off everything, my once-clean feet were covered with soot. I learned from a CSU Extension veggie specialist that the fire-retardant slurry is high in phosphorus, and could harm plants. So how far does this slurry travel? I don't know.

But the ash got me thinking about defensible space. My husband, a retired firefighter of 21 years, has fought many wildfires. He doesn't seem too concerned about the current situation since it is miles away, but he reminded me that in this time of drought, wildfires could happen ANYWHERE. We should all be prepared.

To learn about defensible space, see the Colorado State Forest Service website. Go to csfs.colostate.edu and click on "Protect Your Home, Property & Forest" under the Wildfire Mitigation tab.

How can you be prepared in the garden and landscape? Start by removing any dead plants. Deadhead flowers (removing flower stalks that are finished blooming) as often as they dry out. This will also help perennials and shrubs put more energy back in the root system instead of producing seeds.

Remove leaf litter and needles/cones that are close to the house or in gutters. It just takes one ember to land in a crook of the house where there is debris, and a fire starts.

Closest to the house, use rock mulch, flagstone, paver stones, or other non-combustible materials. Keep wood piles and other wood products/furniture away from the house. Ideally a zone of lower growing, high to moderate water loving plants is next-closest to your house, as long as it does not affect your foundation.

Did you know that there are plants that are more fire resistant? Find a list of them at extension.colostate.edu. Under Topics, click on Natural Resources, Wildfire & Forestry, then scroll down to select FireWise Plant Materials, Fact Sheet 6-305.

Choose plants that do not produce much litter. Aspens are a good high-altitude fire-resistant garden choice. Of course some of the fire resistance depends on drought and how much moisture is in the plants.

Now let's talk drought. I have been getting many calls about older trees not doing well. I know when you live on large properties or in the mountains, there is not much you can do besides depending on Mother Nature for moisture. But you could water a few favorite or most important trees. If they are mature established trees, water out twice their height or spread, and give them a good soak once a month, 12-18" deep. This will keep them vigorous enough to help ward off insect pests.

For trees with lower dead limbs, remove them to decrease fire ladder potential. Prune evergreens when dormant to prevent attracting insects.

A CSU Extension Master Gardener training publication on pruning can be found at extension.colostate.edu. Click on Publications, scroll down to Yard & Garden, select GardenNotes, and look for #612, Pruning Cuts.

Turn pruned limbs into chips or stack in a wood pile, away from your structures. If the plants are diseased or insect-infested, follow appropriate protocol for that particular issue to prevent any spread.

I am hoping for a winter with lots of moisture, to help with the fires and the drought. We can only do what we can do, the rest is up to Mother Nature.

Susan Carter is Horticulture and Natural Resources Agent, Colorado State University Extension, Tri Rivers Area. The Estes Valley Community Garden Board thanks Susan for contributing her knowledge and experience on this important topic.