



BE FIREWISE PART 2

Wildland / Urban Landscape

Expect the Unexpected

Consider the firefighter arriving at a wildfire. Depending on the area, many homes may be endangered. The first priority is the safety of the firefighters and citizens in the area. The fire truck may only hold enough water to wet down 2 or 3 homes before it needs refilling. Plus, confusion from limited visibility due to smoke, constant 2-way radio communications, panicked bystanders evacuating the area, and curiosity-seekers entering the area complicate the situation. Since time will not allow them to give attention to the entire area, a decision is made on which fires to fight where chances of success are high.

Fire officials become concerned when homes are built in remote, densely vegetated areas or that have narrow or sandy access roads, making it impossible for emergency vehicles to navigate.

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“Be Firewise Part 1, Firewise on the Farm” gave farmers 6 steps to prevent a farm fire burning through their profits. Now, the Iowa DNR is expanding these steps to include all of the Iowa wildland landscape.

The Iowa landscape has drastically changed over the past century. The population has increased more than 30 percent and has shifted from a rural to an urban lifestyle. With more than 60 percent of Iowa’s population living in urban communities, many communities have expanded into traditionally natural areas. Each year Iowa’s beautiful landscapes entice more urban residents to push a little further into those natural, wildland areas. This trend has created an extremely complex landscape, known as wildland/urban interface, and a new set of conditions: houses and businesses constructed amid wooded or wildland areas. By populating natural areas, a wildland fire can now reach beyond its natural fuels like trees, brush, and grass to homes, businesses, and human endangerment.

Adapting to a wildland lifestyle requires a viewpoint with fewer urban expectations. For instance, it may be much more difficult, if not impossible, for a fire department to access your house soon enough to save it from a high-intensity wildfire. Wildland fires are a natural process; understanding this and making your home fire-resistant is not only wise but it may protect your entire community.

In order to make your property fire-resistant, you need to first realize that a wildfire does not always burn everything in its path – its course is determined by fuel, weather, and terrain. A fire’s fuel is anything that burns – trees, shrubs, grass, homes, fences, decks, boardwalks, sheds, stored wood. Dead grass or leaves and pine needles spread fire faster than dead twigs and branches. A fire is also energized by dry, windy weather, increasing its flame and spread with embers or sparks. Wind can quickly change a fire’s path, carrying burning embers a mile or more away. And the type of terrain can determine a fire’s path; a fire will travel uphill quicker, with longer flames, than when spreading downhill or on level ground.

The following is a brief outline to help you begin fireproofing your property. For more detailed information visit the Iowa DNR website, www.iowadnr.gov/forestry/fire/firewise.html, or contact Iowa DNR Wildland Fire Supervisor, **Gail Kantak**, Gail.Kantak@dnr.iowa.gov.

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1. Assess the landscape of your community and how your property is placed within this landscape. Consider the following questions: Is there dense vegetation in your community?; Does your property have road access capable of handling emergency equipment?; Does your property have vegetation or any flammable materials within 10 feet of the house?; Do the treetops make a canopy over the buildings?; What type of materials are used in the structures? Assess everything, noting everything that is flammable on your property and how they relate to each other.
2. After your assessment, start making landscape adjustments. The landscape is the easiest and most noticeable place to start. The goal is to limit flammable vegetation and materials surrounding the home, and to have space between individual and/or groups of plants and trees.

Start with the 5 foot perimeter nearest the home; it should have nonflammable landscaping such as rock, pavers, annuals, high-moisture perennials. Remove all dead leaves and stems from the landscape, gutters, and under the deck immediately. Move any stacked firewood to at least 100 feet from the house.

When planning to modify your property to be compatible with the surrounding land, there are three main topics to consider: 1) Access - would firefighters be able to get to your home? 2) The surrounding vegetation - how easily could a fire spread from the vegetation to your home? 3) The structure - how flammable is your home?

Good access requires: Driveways should be at least 12 feet wide with 14 feet of overhead clearance. Driveways longer than 150 feet or ones with sharp curves may need to be 20 feet wide. Many counties and local municipalities have driveway ordinances in place to ensure emergency vehicle access, check with local officials to see if such ordinances exist in your area.

Next move to the 30 foot zone surrounding the home, it should be well-irrigated and free from flammable materials and debris. Plants in this area should be carefully spaced and low-growing. Mow the lawn regularly. Keep wood mulch moist. Prune trees so that the lowest limbs are at least 6 to 10 feet above ground. Remove limbs that hang over the house – not only are they themselves flammable, but they drop leaves and twigs on the house which can easily catch a spark. Do not store patio furniture or lawn accessories under a deck. Firewood and propane tanks should be moved to at least 100 feet from the house.

The next zone is 30 to 100 feet from your home. In this area, clusters of two or three trees should be 30 feet apart or individual trees should be 20 feet apart. Try to mix deciduous and evergreen trees. And again keep tree branches 6 to 10 feet above ground and remove woody debris. Also, creating firebreaks such as driveways, gravel walkways, and open lawns are a huge asset in fire prevention.

And now move to the zone that is 100 to 200 feet from the home. It should be thinned out, but not as thinned as in the 30 to 100 foot zone. Remove heavy accumulations of woody debris such as wood piles or brush piles. Remove any evergreen seedlings growing among taller trees; they act as ladders for a fire to climb to the treetops. Strategically prune tall trees so the treetops are not touching, this reduces the possibility of a crown fire reaching your home.

3. Continue fireproofing by choosing fire-resistant building materials. Even with a perfectly groomed landscape, fire may still reach your home. So the construction materials are significant in how much damage your home sustains.

The roof can be the most vulnerable area during intense wildfires. But, using fire-resistant roofing materials like composition shingle, metal, clay or cement tile can slow a fire's spread.

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Next consider the exterior wall building materials. The best wall materials to resist heat and flames include cement, plaster, stucco, and masonry (concrete, stone, brick or block).

Windows can suffer from intense heat as well. The glass on exterior windows can fracture and collapse, allowing the fire to enter the interior. Use double-pane glass to reduce this risk. Tempered glass is the best option, since it has a high heat tolerance and is less breakable.

Just as fire can enter a home through a broken window, it can enter a home through fascias, soffits, and vents. Enclose these areas with metal screens, reducing the size of the openings. Screening vents prevent burning embers from entering the home.

Also protect vulnerable overhangs or additions to the house, such as room additions, bay windows, decks, porches, carports, pergolas, boardwalks, etc. Remove anything flammable near these areas, and box in the undersides of overhangs, decks, and balconies with fire-resistant materials. Do not attach wood fences to the home.

IOWA DNR FIRE EXPERTS

Gail Kantak

Gail.Kantak@dnr.iowa.gov

Ryan Schlater

Ryan.Schlater@dnr.iowa.gov

Karl Harris

Karl.Harris@dnr.iowa.gov

Living in the beautiful Iowa landscape can have its rewards. Just remember that living within a natural landscape is different than urban-life, so by replacing urban ideals with rural wisdom you can enjoy nature's rewards for years to come.

AREA FORESTERS

Loess Hills State Forest,

Brent Olson

Brent.Olson@dnr.iowa.gov

Shimek State Forest,

John Byrd

John.Byrd@dnr.iowa.gov

Stephens State Forest,

Jessica Flatt

Jessica.Flatt@dnr.iowa.gov

Yellow River State Forest,

Robert Honeywell

Robert.Honeywell@dnr.iowa.gov

WILDLAND FIRE PROGRAM

HEADQUARTERS

DNR State Forest Nursery

2404 S Duff Ave, Ames, IA 50010

Phone 515-233-1161

Fax 515-233-1131

