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How Can I Protect My Home From A Wildfire?

Darren McAvoy

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ask A Specialist

A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Protect My Home From A Wildfire?

Darren McAvoy answers:*

Many of Utah's smaller communities and rural developments are built in forests, woodlands and rangelands that have not seen fire in more than one hundred years. The logical interpretation of this lack of fire is that the surrounding countryside is unlikely to burn. As the grass, brush, and trees continue to grow, however, fuels build up, and so does the corresponding fire danger, as experienced in Utah this summer.

Having wildland fires is not a choice that anyone gets to make. Wildland fires can and will continue to burn, and in some cases they will take homes with them. Fire plays a vital role in the wildlands of Utah. Even if we could physically and economically remove fire from our landscape we probably wouldn't want to, because fire can do good things for Utah's forests and rangelands. We can choose to make our homes more resistant to wildfire. Here are some specific tips to help your house withstand an inevitable fire event:

- Remove dead leaves, pine needles, and sticks that fall on or near your house to reduce the ignitability of your home. Remove these on a regular basis, depending on the type and amount of vegetation, within a minimum distance of 30 feet from your home.
- Move firewood, construction materials and other flammables at least 30 feet away from your home, especially during the summer.
- Enclose the eaves of your home with soffits and screen all vents and other openings. This will keep out the blowing embers that can start fires in your attic space.
- Prevent flames from directly hitting your home by appropriately pruning or cutting highly flammable trees and bushes. Note that evergreen and scrub oak tend to be highly flammable, while aspen and broad-leafed ornamentals tend to be less flammable.
- Widely spaced trees and shrubs are a compromise between the Sahara Desert look and a pyromaniac's paradise.
- If you own a big piece of manicured property, buffer it from adjacent wildlands by maintaining a fuel break of lowgrowing plants 30 to 70 feet out from buildings.
- Don't dump litter on the edge of your property or in adjacent woodlands. It looks bad, it's a fire hazard and, anyway, that's why there are local landfills.
- Protect your tree crowns (and home insurance premium rates) from catastrophic fire by pruning trees 10 to 20 feet above the ground.
- If you want firefighters to do their job, landscape your property so their equipment can reach it. Fences, trees and retaining walls located in the wrong place can let in the fire and keep out the fire department.

- Create a buffer zone for your entire neighborhood. Follow the maxim, “be kind to (i.e., cooperate with) your neighbors.”

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* Darren McAvoy is Utah State University Extension Forestry Program Associate