HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

PROTECT HOMES FROM WILDFIRES

The smell of smoke and the sound of sirens have been too common as wildfires burn in rural areas. Our woodlands are at risk of wildfires for at least one more month until summer rains begin; maybe longer if drenching rainstorms don’t quench the parched ecosystems.

Land managers and ranchers use a technique called prescribed fire to encourage the development of healthy ecosystems while reducing the risk of destructive wildfires in natural areas. Homeowners should take steps to protect their property from wildfire when they live near natural grazing land, parks and preserves. Developers can also design their projects to minimize wildfire risks while preserving nature.

Osceola County is rapidly becoming an urban county, yet there are still vast areas of ranch lands and open space. Urban growth is planned in the northwest part of the county with the intent of leaving most of the acreage more sparsely developed and with a rural character. Much of the area outside the Urban Growth Boundary will continue in ranch land, state, and county parks. This provides for conservation of large tracts of natural ecosystems and agricultural land.

The challenge is at the rural-urban interface, the area where rural land and development meet. As the county grows, ranch lands within the UGB convert to urban development. Planners are working to accommodate the need for housing and economic growth and balance that with preservation and enhancement of the natural lands that were formerly ranches.

Developments adjacent to natural areas attract buyers who enjoy watching nature and who are willing to pay for this natural amenity, just as some are willing to pay for a golf course community. Without proper planning, housing and businesses are at risk at this interface. Developers must consider these different circumstances and plan for fire risk as you would plan for stray golf balls.

The University of Florida and the Florida Department of Agriculture’s Division of Forestry work closely with community planners to understand these risks and develop Fire Wise Communities.

One important concept is defensible space. This area is not so fire prone and is open for fire trucks to have access. A 30-foot defensible space is recommended around homes and structures to prevent damage from nearby fires. However, a 50-foot firebreak should be managed at the perimeter where fire could be a threat from outside the property.

Rather than removing all vegetation at the perimeter, leave large trees to provide shade and wildlife habitat. However, selectively remove flammable understory shrubs to slow the spread of ground fires from adjacent lands to the development. Remove them in a way to avoid disturbing the roots of the existing trees. Chopping and chipping the aboveground plant portions are some techniques used to remove shrubs without digging up roots that would damage desirable trees.
Irrigated, thriving grass sod or other living groundcover is desirable at the interface perimeter. It is more fire resistant than leaves or organic mulch such as bark or pine needles that we recommend for landscaping in less risky areas. Landscape architects that are familiar with native plants can recommend less flammable plants to help blend the natural area with urban landscapes.

Road layout, parking areas, perimeter landscaping and the location of storm water ponds can all serve dual duty by providing needed services and performing as fire breaks between housing and susceptible fire prone natural areas.

In natural areas where fire is a threat, it is critical to keep flammable mulch away from structures. This is a case where gravel or bare soil is more beneficial than organic mulch. Wood fences are rustic and vinyl fencing is low maintenance but both are very flammable and not recommended for development in fire prone areas.

Fire trucks need a water source to refill. New developments are required to have fire hydrants but storm water ponds and sometimes swimming pools may become emergency sources for water when wild fires threaten homes in natural areas. Dry hydrants can provide easy hookups for fire trucks.

Developers should consider construction practices that minimize property risk such as the use of tile or metal roofs instead of flammable asphalt shingles. Fiber cement siding has a good fire rating, is durable, and low maintenance and a good alternative to wood or vinyl in fire prone communities.

The Division of Forestry works with community planners to evaluate and minimize fire risk when designing projects. It is a lot easier to redraw plans than to rebuild homes and lives after a fire. For more ideas to protect your home and minimize fire risk to developments, contact the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension Service at 321-697-3000.

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