PLANT LIFE COLUMN

WILDFIRES AND WATER

Wildfires and water restrictions are all being brought on by severe dry weather. If you can do a rain dance, now is the time. We really could use some rain.

Florida has experienced numerous wildfires recently. Unfortunately, most are a result of arson though some are a result of illegal burning.

If you notice suspicious activity that may be related to arson fires, please call 1-800-342-5869. The Florida Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry will work with law enforcement to investigate any situations relating to arson.

Burning trash outdoors is not recommended during these conditions. A single spark or airborne ember is enough to set thousands of acres on fire. The flame from an outdoor campfire can quickly escape a fire ring if dry leaves or pine needles fall on the coals. It is best to be safe; don't burn outdoors until fire danger is reduced.

Fires are important for proper growth of some types of plants and animals, however, wildfires tend to burn hotter and cause more damage when conditions are so dry.

Wildfires are of special concern in dry weather if you live in a rural wooded area. Look around and try to evaluate your risk for wildfire. If you have a hard time seeing your neighbor's home through dense vegetation, you should take special precautions. One important concept is to develop a 30' defensible space as a buffer around your home. This area should have low fire risk and allow fire trucks easy access to protect your home. Leave at least a 16' clear area along driveways to allow trucks to enter your property.

It may be surprising to learn that green plants burn. Palmetto, gall berry and wax myrtles contain oils and resins that are highly flammable. These are great plants for native landscapes but should not be planted within the defensible space in high fire risk areas in order to reduce fire danger. Large hardwoods such as oaks produce leaf litter that is less likely to burn than pine needles. Hardwoods also provide shade which cools the soil and helps conserve soil moisture. According the University of Florida, there is a long list of less flammable plants for fire prone areas. Select hardwood trees such as dogwood, red maple, sycamore, sweet gum, persimmon, sugar berry, black cherry, hophornbeam and magnolia for shade.

Trim lower branches up to 10' on tall trees. Remove vines and shrubs from around pine trees to keep ground fires from climbing up to pine tree tops. Fire breaks help stop ground fires, but once they get into tree tops, they move very fast.

Mowed grass is acceptable within the defensible space. Do not use natural wood mulch near your home if you are at risk of wildfire.

Islands of landscape shrubs are acceptable but it is best to avoid large continuous beds that allow fire to intensify. Thin tree branches so they do not touch each other within the defensible space. Viburnum, ferns, beautyberry, wild azalea and coontie are examples of shrubs that are less flammable.

If you are concerned that your neighborhood is at special risk, contact us for more information on things you can do to reduce fire risk.

Wise water use is also important now. Avoid new landscape planting if possible to reduce the need for extra irrigation. Water only as needed. Turn of automatic time clocks and instead, allow lawns and shrubs to tell you when they need water. Don't water during the day. Instead, water during early morning hours when there is less wind and lower chance of evaporation.
This is a good time to replenish mulch in flower beds. Mulch conserves water so you can hold off longer in between waterings.

Contact the Osceola County Extension office for more information on helping your lawn and landscape cope with drought. Call (321) 697-3000 or email us at epabon5@ufl.edu.

Dry weather is predicted through mid summer so fire prevention and water conservation measures are really important now.

See also Landscaping in Florida with Fire in Mind

Eleanor Foerste  
Natural Resources Agent  
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida  
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane  
Kissimmee, FL 34744  
(321) 697-3000  
Fax (321) 697-3010  
efoe@osceola.org  
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu  
Date: February 24th, 1001