

City of Oakland
Recommendations for Ecologically Sensitive Fire Abatement
Vegetation Management Practices

The following information is provided for property owners required to trim or remove vegetation from their property in order to create a fire-safe environment

The City of Oakland encourages property owners to use environmentally sensitive techniques while managing vegetation to reduce the risk of major fires. This document provides recommendations for planting, tips for maintaining existing vegetation, and specific species of plants that are preferable due to their fire resistance.

What is Fire Safe Landscaping?

Making your property fire safe does not require removing all of the vegetation you can see. In fact, clear cutting vegetation on your property can lead to a series of other problems including susceptibility to invasion by aggressive weeds, erosion, and landslides. Also, by removing all the vegetation on your property you may be in violation of the City of Oakland's Creek and Tree Protection Ordinances. The City's goal is to achieve fire safety while also enhancing the beauty and environmental quality in Oakland.

A fire safe landscape uses fire-resistant plants (plants less likely to burn and slower to ignite) strategically placed and maintained to resist the spread of fire to your or your neighbor's home. It also is a landscape maintained to be relatively free of dead and dry plant materials, with living shrubs and trees managed so they will not serve as fire ladders in the event of a fire reaching your property.

Every home needs *defensible space*, an area around it free from dangerous accumulations of flammable vegetation, which allows firefighters a safe working area within which to defend against an oncoming wildfire. Without this safety zone, firefighters are less likely to risk their lives defending your home.

You do not need a lot of money to make your property fire safe. You will also find that a fire-safe landscape can increase your property value, conserve water, and protect the creeks, water quality, and native habitats of the City of Oakland.

Much of the following information was provided by the California Fire Safe Council and offers a series of helpful suggestions for protecting your property in a manner that will protect your home, and the environment.

SPACING

- Group plants of similar height and water requirements to create a "landscape mosaic" that can slow the spread of fire and use water most efficiently.

- Space trees at least 10 feet apart, and keep branches trimmed at least 10 feet from your roof.
- For trees taller than 18 feet, prune lower branches (only those that are less than 4 inches across) within six feet of the ground.
- If your property is within 100 feet of a creek, you should learn about the City of Oakland's *Creek Protection Ordinance*. Creeks are important and sensitive areas where fuel-reduction work needs to be done with special care. Generally, removal of non-native vegetation (such as ivy or French broom or eucalyptus debris) is recommended, but without exposing the creek to erosion pollution and potentially putting your property at risk. For more information call the Creek Hotline Number at **238-6600**, and your call will be directed to an appropriate staff person with whom you may discuss this issue.

PLANTS AND PLANT MAINTENANCE

- Favor fire-resistant, drought-tolerant plants that have a high moisture content. For a list of fire-resistant plants native to California, and therefore well suited to our summer-dry climate, please see the attached list of Fire Wise Native Plants.
- Consider removing or do not plant pyrophytic plants on your property. Pyrophytic plants are plants with a very high rating of flammability. They almost attract fire. Please reference the attached list of Highly Flammable Plants.
- Regularly prune or thin shrubs, trees, and other plants to minimize the fuel load. Do not top trees.
- Recycle/compost plant material. Participate in the City of Oakland's green waste recycling program. You can also compost plant litter and create a money-saving alternative to store-bought mulch. A relatively shallow layer of decomposing leaves (such as from native oaks) has many benefits to your landscape and is not a fire hazard.
- Herbicides should only be used with extreme caution and care. It is very easy to unknowingly kill of valuable native plants and wildflowers, and there are many negative side effects to herbicide use, such as the loss of beneficial insects. Herbicides should never be used near creeks, as aquatic life is very sensitive to pesticides and pollution of all types.

WATERING

- Choose the right irrigation system. While all plants will eventually burn, healthy plants burn less quickly. Your plant selection and water availability will determine the right system for you.
- Consider drip irrigation for watering your landscape. It is effective and conserves water because it targets where the water goes and how much gets there.
- Again, there are many benefits to drought-tolerant native vegetation. A primary benefit is that after the native plant becomes established (the first one to two years that the plant is in the ground) the plant requires little to no irrigation.

TIMING

- Good vegetation management is a year-round activity. Weeds and dead woody fuels that are cut in the winter and spring can decompose during the wet season to reduce the build-up of material that must be hauled away in the summer. Working in winter can have

many benefits, such as the fact that poison oak is leafless and a bit less “contagious,” the temperatures are cooler, and it is easier to deal with some weeds.

- However, there are dangers too, such as loose soils and erosion concerns. Winter work should only be undertaken in a slow careful and informed way; a gradual approach of this kind will avoid denuded landscapes that could put your property at risk for erosion and landslides. Clear-cutting the vegetation on your property is almost assuredly not the best solution in any season. Thoughtless, aggressive tactics such as this can lead to a whole host of future problems in addition to erosion, including noxious weed invasions and higher maintenance over the long term.

SHARING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

- Involve your gardener. If a gardener cares for your property, ask him or her to include these regular maintenance suggestions as part of their routine service.
- Talk to your neighbors, and educate them about the many natural values and practical benefits of our local native vegetation.
- If you hire a contractor to conduct your vegetation management, make sure that he or she is aware of all the alternatives available. Also make sure that he or she is aware of the City of Oakland’s Creek and Tree Protection Ordinances.

For more information about protecting your property from fire, please call the Oakland Fire Department at **(510) 238-7388**.

For more information on, or to discuss alternatives for ecologically sensitive vegetation management practices, please call the Public Works Agency, Environmental Services Division at: **(510) 238-6600**.