

Wait a minute! Wildfires in January?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

As I write this at the end of January, we have a pair of wildfires in the Rogue Basin burning, and there are also a couple up along the Oregon coast! What's that all about? Can you spell *drought*?

The National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center has southwestern Oregon in a severe drought that is predicted to persist at least through April. So, *now* is the time to start preparing *your* property, in case fire season comes early.

Late winter and early spring is the perfect time to begin thinning and pruning to develop and/or maintain your defensible space and access routes. Maintenance work can be a bit harder if you've let it slide, so tackle it now while temperatures are still fairly cool. Save the close-in small details of homesite cleanup (which are *equally* important to surviving a wildfire) for late April and May, when it will be warmer.

Making your access route safe should be your first priority: how safe are you if firefighters can't get to your house or if you can't evacuate? (And yes, *this is* a part of defensible space.) Our local building codes designate clearance numbers for height, width and slope of the driveway. Why? So that emergency and fire vehicles can safely come up your driveway, and also so that you can evacuate at the same time they are arriving.

Local codes require a vegetation clearance of at least 13½ feet *above* the driveway, a clear driving surface at least 14 feet wide, and thinning on either side of the driveway to provide 20 feet of open travel room free of vegetation.

Once your access is cleaned up, look

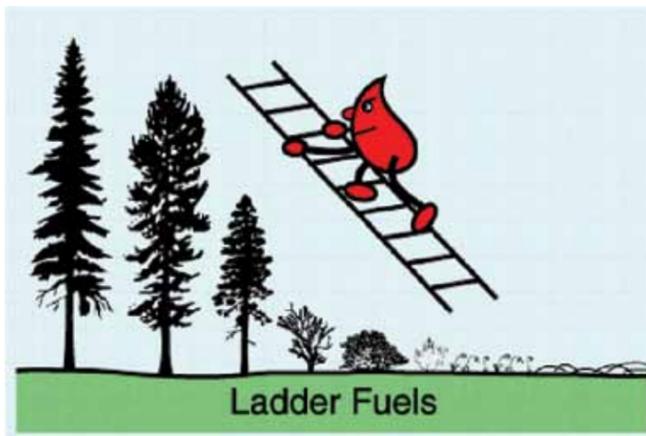
at your defensible space—the first 100 feet around your home, garage and other outbuildings. If you thinned for this safe area 5 to 10 years ago, you probably need to do some maintenance thinning, because *stuff grows!* Thinning and/or pruning trees on your property can help the firewood supply; it also makes fighting a wildfire on your property safer for firefighters. We're told to prune up branches to 10 feet above the ground so that firefighters can safely work in a forested area without fighting low-hanging branches. The only reason you'd need to prune higher would be on a very steep slope, or if there were "ladder fuels" below. Remember that term? Study the illustration below and use the "3x-the-height" rule (flames can be three times the height of the vegetation source) when you're working in your defensible space.

Don't forget that younger trees should be pruned slowly as they grow. Per our local Oregon State University Extension Forester Max

Bennett, a tree's crown (branches and foliage) is its "food factory." So if we prune the lower branches too soon we can compromise the tree's vigor! Max advises to leave at least 50 percent live-crown ratio; I usually prune up about one-third the total height of the tree.

And as we work to reduce fuels in our defensible space, what about the dead branches, leaves and such on the ground? Max explained to me that there is slash, litter, duff and soil, in that order, on the ground. Slash (larger materials generated from thinning or pruning) should be removed from the defensible space area. Litter is fine loose materials such as leaves, twigs, cones or needles. These contain "significant quantities of essential plant nutrients" per Max, and so allowing litter to remain, decay and work into the soil is important for vegetation and soil productivity. This organic material on the soil surface also helps capture and store that rainfall that we've been missing! However, heavy litter does not belong up against your house or outbuildings, as it could easily contribute to igniting these structures.

Around the home that "3x-the-height" ladder-fuel deal comes into play a lot with our defensible space, since it's one of



the reasons fire spreads so easily. For example, a three-foot shrub might be okay planted under a mature tree, but what happens a few years later when that shrub is six feet tall? Are the branches of that mature tree pruned up enough to *not catch fire* if the shrub ignites from a ground fire? Remember: things grow over time, including your ladder fuels!

A final thought for spring cleanup: the "3x-the-height" concept also applies when you're *burning* a pile of slash or even just leaves; in fact, it originated from observing wildfires. Vegetation and slash piles can produce *flames* three times their height. Therefore, a four-foot-tall slash pile can produce flames 12 feet above the pile, or up to 16 feet above the ground! So *look up* before you light the match. I know from experience that the heat carries way up above that height, so don't scorch any power lines or legacy trees!

Let's hope that we're not already in fire season by the next *Applegater* issue, so that I can cover last-minute preparations around the home!

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Burn reminder

Before burning outdoors any time of year, check with your fire district to make sure that day is an official burn day.

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