

# Be Fire Wise and Start With Your Landscaping!

– Written By [Amanda Bratcher](#) and updated by [Rhonda Gaster](#)

We have all watched in horror as wildfires have ravaged the western states and provinces of North America. It can be devastating and overwhelming to see homes go up in flames, but it also may seem far away. This is not true. Less than 100 years ago folks in the Sandhills would “sweep” their yard to keep fire that was naturally burning from reaching their homes. Lee County is at the tip of the Sandhills region of North Carolina, and this is one of the prime ecosystems that rely on and cultivate fire. It is imperative that as you manage your landscape and property in this region that you keep in mind the concepts of fire-wise gardening.

## Why is fire here?

Fire is an essential and natural component of the Sandhills ecosystem in North Carolina. The native ecosystem has been predominantly Longleaf Pine Savanna for millions of years. Fire prevents the encroachment of hardwoods (like oaks) that would otherwise shade out the understory. This allows sunlight to reach the ground, which is crucial for the survival of grasses, wildflowers, and young longleaf pines. Regular, low-intensity fires (called controlled burns) help reduce the accumulation of dead leaves, pine needles, and other flammable material. This minimizes the risk of severe, destructive wildfires. This also creates a diversity of ecosystem types within the region, which in turn supports a diversity of plant and animal species. And because of this relationship, fire can stimulate the germination of some plant species, including the longleaf pine itself.

## Is my property in danger?!

Your house is not necessarily in danger, but it is at risk (and cutting down all the trees won't solve it!). The Sandhills of North Carolina is a special, unique ecosystem that modern humans have found make for good horse pasture, timber production and golf courses. Unfortunately, this makes it difficult for land managers and foresters to properly manage these ecosystems with fire, which can actually keep people and property safer by naturally (with fire) reducing “fuel loads”, or “stuff on the ground that can catch fire!”

## Create “defensible space”

“Fire-resistant landscaping involves creating “defensible space,” or selecting, placing, and maintaining plants and other landscape features around your home in a way that helps make your home less vulnerable to damage or loss from wildfire,” according to the “Fire-Resistant Landscaping in North Carolina” publication from NC State Forestry.

This can look different for everyone, and depends on structures and how your property is organized. The ideal amount of defensible space in a fire-resistant landscape should extend

outward from your home and any attached structures such as fences or decks at least 100 feet in all directions. This space acts as a buffer between your home and a potential wildfire.

## **Assess Your Site**

The Sandhills region is characterized by its unique ecosystem with longleaf pine savannas and open woodlands. These ecosystems are naturally adapted to fire, but wildfires can still pose a threat to homes. Observe your property and its proximity to neighboring properties and structures. Observe the plant species and the amount of debris that accumulates around your yard. Observe how winds typically blow through your area. This helps you understand how fire might spread, especially in the open landscapes of the Sandhills.

## **Be aware of the weather**

Monitor weather conditions, especially during fire season. You may have noticed your phone pinging a weather alert or the local fire department or Forest Service Ranger office signs cautioning about weather conditions. Pay attention to drought warnings, red flag days, and fire danger levels. The National Weather Service will release “Special Weather Statements” when there are ideal conditions for fire. You may notice that in these reports the humidity is low and the winds are high, and they caution outdoor open flames. There have been documented instances of embers traveling more than five miles in front of a wildfire. Finally, you should have a plan in place for what to do during a wildfire, including evacuation routes.

## **Select appropriate landscape plants**

Did you know some plants are more fire-prone than others? Yes! Some of our favorite “foundation plants” are highly flammable, like inkberry holly (*Ilex glabra*), yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*), and wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), just to name a few. If you choose to use these plants, it is best to place them outside of your defensible zone!

That being said, we can also utilize native plants adapted to the Sandhills environment, such as native grasses, wildflowers, and drought-tolerant shrubs that in the savanna ecosystem resist fire! These plants are often more fire-resistant and contribute to the health of the local ecosystem.

NC State Forestry’s publication on “Fire-Resistant Landscaping in North Carolina” has a great list of low-, medium- and high-flammability plants.

## **Be aware of what your house is constructed of**

Smokey the Bear has gone from proclaiming “Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires!” to “Only You Can Prevent Wildfires!”. Our understanding of fire in the ecosystem has changed dramatically in the last century and house construction materials have not always taken fire in the ecosystem into account. If you live among the longleaf pines, it would be wise to become aware of what your house is made of. For roofing, use fire-resistant materials like metal, tile, or concrete. Keep debris from accumulating on the roof and in the gutters,

especially pine needles! Choose non-combustible materials for siding of your house, like stucco, brick, or stone. Vinyl siding, while not inherently flammable, can be affected by fire by melting and becoming deformed, which can create openings in the siding, allowing flames to penetrate the underlying structure. While not as readily combustible as wood, vinyl siding can still contribute to the spread of fire. Studies have shown that vinyl siding can contribute to the rapid spread of fire, particularly when combined with certain types of insulation. Burning vinyl releases toxic fumes, including hydrogen chloride and other harmful chemicals.

### **Take-Homes**

You can significantly increase your home's resilience to wildfire and protect your family and property by implementing these firewise landscaping principles, considering the unique characteristics of the Sandhills ecosystem, and working with local resources. Additionally, by embracing fire in the community as a natural process and utilizing controlled burns responsibly, we can help ensure the long-term survival of this unique and valuable ecosystem. Balancing landscape management practices with ecosystem management practices can ensure public safety. Remember, only you can prevent wildfires!

Important Note: While fire is crucial, it's important to emphasize that controlled burns are conducted by trained professionals under carefully assessed conditions. These prescribed burns are essential for maintaining the health and integrity of the Sandhills ecosystem. If you would like more resources.

[Amanda Bratcher](#)

**Extension Agent, Agriculture – Horticulture N.C. Cooperative Extension, Lee County Center**

**Rhonda Gaster County Extension Administrative Assistant**