

# Make a Difference

By Kelsi Mottet

Marketing, Education, & Outreach Coordinator Whidbey Island Conservation District

## LANDSCAPING YOUR WHIDBEY PROPERTY WITH FIREWISE IN MIND

It's the dead of summer. Like me, if you're from Whidbey Island, you knew it a few weeks ago when the heat wave arrived. My ear has also picked up on conversations laden with the word "wildfire," when only a month ago we were conversing as to how wet and cool of a season it had been so far. This past week, residents across the Pacific Northwest have stood daily witness to hazy sunshine and red moons, the direct result of smoke from massive wildfires still occurring in our neighbor to the north, British Columbia.

When going to write this article, I thought that perhaps many readers may be thinking "Enough already, Kelsi, with this Firewise talk – it's Whidbey Island!" Yet, I've received more inquiries in the past month from residents requesting Firewise Home Assessment services than I have in the previous 12 – and that says something. I've observed overall heightened public awareness about wildfires. Many residents recognize that wildfires aren't reserved only for east of the mountains, but that Whidbey Island, too, has its own unique micro-wildfire regimes.

As more people discover the treasure that is Whidbey Island, more people are moving here. I definitely don't blame them – it's beautiful here! Whidbey is known for its deep, secluded forests and sweeping shorelines. As more homes are built on the island, that means an increase in homes bordering the Wildland/Urban Interface (W.U.I.) – a term coined by fire professionals to mean the area where homes and structures are up against large tracts of forestland. Why, perhaps, should this be something one should know? Well, with an increasing wildland/urban interface, this means that humans, their structures, and natural lands are in direct contact with one another. With this direct and more frequent contact comes the responsibility of knowing how to live in such a way that balances our needs as residents with the ecological processes – wildfire, included – that may occur on the land. Whether you're a new resident building here for the first time or a long-time landowner, Whidbey's increasing W.U.I. provides an opportunity for us all to be more Firewise in our daily lives – a concerted effort to live closer in balance with nature.

For garden and landscaping lovers, I encourage you to keep Firewise in mind when you're in the process of planning your property or modifying it as the seasons change. Believe it or not, there are quite a few ways in which we can unite together our goals for landscape aesthetics, privacy, habitat, and we can incorporate wildfire protection, too. In our front and back yards, and in the greater span of our Whidbey Island communities, Firewise landscaping allows us to be proactive about wildfire protection, encourages us to live more in balance with our land's ecological processes, as well as meet our intrinsic desires for a landscape that's beautiful, functional, and fun.

When it comes to Firewise landscaping on Whidbey Island, consider asking yourself the following "Five F's" before embarking on your plan. Firewise can serve as a filter for which your typical landscaping plans can be reviewed.

- **Function** – What are my goals for this landscape and in what ways can Firewise be integrated?
- **Fit** – How will the landscape fit in (work with) the locale surrounding it?
- **Financial** – Can I afford design, installation, and long-term maintenance of the landscape?
- **Fun** – What kind of aesthetics (colors, heights, textures) do I want to accentuate in the landscape?
- **Follow Through** – How will the landscape balance my needs with the needs of nature around me?

Subtle adjustments to any landscape plan can help it to be more Firewise, while also staying true to your goals and to the uniqueness of the Whidbey Island landscape. For starters, envision your property broken up into 3 Firewise Landscaping Zones.

- **Zone 1:** 0 – 5 feet from your home
- **Zone 2:** 5 – 30 feet from your home
- **Zone 3:** 30 – 100 feet+ from your home

If you've read previous articles of mine here in *Whidbey Weekly*, you might recall the "Home Ignition Zone" – three zones that include your home structure and its immediate surroundings out to 100 ft. With Firewise landscaping, you can achieve both beauty,

as well as create breaks in dry, fine fuels (vegetation) that surround your property, working with your landscape in a way so that if a wildfire were to occur, it'd be "slow, low, and OUT" by the time a flame reaches your home. One important goal of Firewise landscaping is to keep your vegetation regularly pruned and maintained so that volume lessens as you get nearer to your home structure.

- **Zone 1 "Domestic Planting Zone" 0 – 5 feet:** Focus on carefully selecting plants with both suitability to Whidbey's climate and to Firewise. The plants closest to your house should be well-irrigated, perhaps with a drip irrigation system that uses very minimal water as a means to conserve our precious resource during the dry summer months. You might also consider drought-tolerant plants that require less water overall, as they tend to be more fire-resistant. Consider mulching using rock or gravel, a form of "hardscaping." If you decide to go the route of beauty bark, moisten it to reduce the potential for wildfire ignition. Make sure of gravel or stone pathways as effective "fuel breaks".
- **Zone 2 "Fire Deceleration Zone" 5 – 30 feet:** Focus on selecting low-growing, fire resistant plants clustered together to break up a continuous fuel source. Note that "fire-resistant" does not mean "fireproof." Any plant can burn if not properly maintained. Fire-resistant plants tend to have less "duffage" (i.e. material that dries over a year and stays under the plant), retain more water and salt, and contain less resins and aromatic oils, which can increase flammability. In addition to considering these characteristics when choosing species to plant, also consider checking out the following resources to help assist you in selecting species:

- » *Fire-Resistant Plants for Home Landscapes* - <http://bit.ly/2vXhzcz>
- » *Firewise Guide to Landscape & Construction* - <http://bit.ly/2wCdWpk>
- » *Prepare for Drought & Fire Danger* - <http://bit.ly/2uAakpf>
- » *When Yard Work Works for You* - <http://bit.ly/2uOrYC7>
- » *Fire Resistant Plants* - <http://bit.ly/2wBVkpH>

- **Zone 3 "Low Fuel Volume & Natural Zone" 30 – 100 feet+:** Focus on techniques such as selective planting, as well as choosing lower growing plants. For trees, ensure they are spaced in a way that isn't overcrowded and promotes individual tree and overall forest health. For trees taller than 20 feet, consider creating some vertical separation between the lowest hanging limbs and surface fuels up to 10 feet. For trees or shrubs less than 20 feet, prune limbs up to but no more than 1/3 height of the tree or shrub to reduce ladder fuels while also allowing the plant to effectively photosynthesize. Lastly, do a site analysis prior to any implementation steps, considering seasonal weather, prevailing winds, contours of the land and neighboring terrain, existing native vegetation, and your area's history of wildfire in your landscaping decisions. Rather than just clearing your land, make intelligent choices, ensure you have proper permits, and consult a local landscape professional about what vegetation to keep and remove based on this site analysis.

We have a nearly endless potential here on Whidbey Island for landscaping that achieves multiple goals and allows us to live more in balance with nature. As you go forth and modify your existing landscape or start anew with these tips and tricks, remember that the key to any landscape's health is a plan for long-term maintenance. Ask yourself, how can I balance my landscaping goals now with the life of this home and property? That's the foundation of resource conservation – how to manage our land in a way that links present with future.

Additional resources, expertise, and support pertaining to Firewise landscaping, as well as other natural resource conservation services are available to all Whidbey Island residents through the Whidbey Island Conservation District. To learn more, visit [www.whidbeycd.org](http://www.whidbeycd.org) or contact the Whidbey Island Conservation District at (888) 678-4922.

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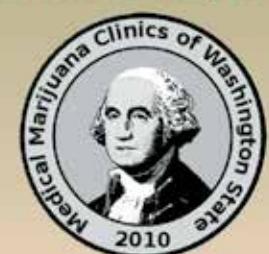
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