

# FireWise Plants

I had a ponderosa pine tree in my yard. It stood about 10 feet from the corner of the house, its high branches stretched out, nearly brushing the roof when the wind blew. On the afternoon of April 9, 2011, an ember from the wildfire raging across the street set a branch on fire. The fire raced along the limb, jumped to the dry, wooden eaves of my 100-year old adobe house. In the end, there was nothing left.

Sadly, my story is not new or unusual. Thousands of homes were lost across the state of Texas in 2011 due to wildfires. How many of those could have been saved if we had practiced FireWise landscaping and used fire-resistant plants?

FireWise landscaping is as much about how you plant as what you plant. For information about how to landscape so that you have a defensible space around your house, google "FireWise" or visit the Colorado Extension Agency ([www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/natres/06305.html](http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/natres/06305.html)) to see some of their excellent publications about living with wildfires.

All plants are potential fuel for fire, but there are some that are more fire resistant than others. According to the Colorado Extension Agency there are two general concepts to keep in mind when choosing FireWise plant species:

- 1) A plant's moisture content is the most important factor governing its volatility. Be careful though. Some trees, such as conifers, may have a high moisture content but, because of their oils and resins, still be highly flammable.
- 2) Deciduous plants tend to be more fire resistant, because their leaves have higher moisture content and their basic chemistry is less flammable.

*Deciduous trees are more fire-resistant than evergreens because their leaves have higher moisture content and, when dormant, there is less fuel to carry fire through the canopy. Good choices for FireWise trees in our region include redbuds (top), fragrant ash (center), and bigtooth maples (bottom).* ►





▲ *Cacti and succulents such as prickly pear, cane chollas, and Faxon's yuccas have a high moisture content making them ideal for FireWise landscaping.*

### Characteristics of a fire-resistant plant

All plants will burn, but when designing your landscape in a fire-prone area, you might want to look for at least one of these characteristics in the plants that you choose.

*They grow without accumulating large amounts of dead branches, needles, or leaves.* Some plants are just plain trashy. They drop limbs or leaves throughout the year. This dead material becomes excellent fuel for a fire.

*They have open, loose branches with low volume of total vegetation.* Open branches and small leaves is a characteristic of many of our desert plants. This natural spacing not only reduces evapotranspiration, but also limits the fuel load.

*They have low sap or resin content.* Pines and junipers have a high oil and resin content, making them fast burning and leading to the rapid spread of a fire. Deciduous trees, on the other hand, tend to have a lower resin content, making them more fire-resistant.

*They have high moisture content.* Those of us lucky enough to live in the Chihua-

huan Desert region have many options for using plants with high moisture content in our landscaping. Pick a cactus, yucca, or other succulent and start planting!

*They grow slowly and need little maintenance.* Again, most desert shrubs, trees, and succulents are very slow growing, rarely need pruning, and make excellent fire-wise landscaping plants.

*They are short and grow close to the ground.* Short, low-growing plants reduce the amount of available fuel and hamper the fire's ability to move quickly across the landscape.

*They can reestablish following a fire, reducing relandscaping costs.* No one wants to believe that their yard is going to burn, but if it does happen, the thought that you put into your landscaping now will really pay off. Some plants, such as yuccas, milkweeds, and some oak trees are adapted to fire and will regrow quickly even when burned. Choosing fire-adapted plants will greatly reduce your landscaping costs should you suffer the tragedy of a wildfire.

### Fire resistant doesn't have to be ugly

Many people hesitate to landscape with fire-resistant plants because they think that "fire-resistant" is the same as "ugly." As you can see from the fire-resistant plants that we've featured in this article, "fire-resistant" is not the same as "ugly." Many of our native plants are adapted to wildfire and are beautiful and drought-resistant as well.

For a list of FireWise plant species that will do well in the northern Chihuahuan Desert, visit [www.cdri.org](http://www.cdri.org) and look under the Desert Explorer tab for Sustainable Development. Many thanks to Martha Latta for putting the list of FireWise plants together.



# FireWise Plants in the Botanical Gardens



Damianita  
*Chrysactinia mexicana*



Cliff Rose  
*Purshia mexicana*



Cenizo  
*Leucophyllum* sp.



Bush Honeysuckle  
*Lonicera albiflora*



Utah Serviceberry  
*Amelanchier utahensis*



Algirita  
*Mahonia trifoliolata*



Sumacs  
*Rhus* sp.



Woods Rose  
*Rosa woodsii*



Purple Coneflower  
*Echinacea purpurea*



Skullcap  
*Scutellaria drummondii*



Primrose  
*Oenothera* sp.



Prairie Zinnia  
*Zinnia grandiflora*



Fleabane  
*Erigeron* sp.



Prairie Coneflower  
*Ratibida* sp.



Penstemon  
*Penstemon* sp.

Many of these plants are available at the CDRI's Annual Native Plant Sale in late April or at your local native plant nursery.