

Updates to the Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe and Vicinity
(Please place this sheet in your Home Landscaping Guides)

New Recommendations for Vegetation and Mulch to Reduce Risks Due to Wildfire

After the Angora Fire of 2007, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) and the Lake Tahoe Basin fire chiefs agreed to make some changes to Best Management Practices (BMPs) recommendations to make it easier for homeowners to implement effective defensible space practices. These are described in “Living With Fire—A Guide for the Homeowner, Lake Tahoe Basin” (Second Edition). Please make note of the following changes to specific pages in the “Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe and Vicinity,” University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) publication EB 06-01, which can also be found online at: <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/nr/2006/eb0601.pdf>.

Defensible Space Zones

The area from 0- 5 feet from structures should be a *noncombustible zone*. In this zone, you should remove flammable shrubs and trees, dead branches and dried grass, flowers and weeds. Do not use pine needles, bark or wood mulches in this zone. This zone includes both the drip lines and gable ends of structures. It can be covered with gravel, rock, brick, concrete, or low-growing, irrigated herbaceous plants such as lawn, erosion control grasses, clover, forbs and succulents. Firewood, flammable construction materials and dead plant materials should be removed from this zone. All border, baffle and cross member grade control materials used for a dripline treatment within 5 feet of structures should be non-combustible. A wood border is acceptable at the perimeter of a dripline treatment 5 feet from the structure as long as there are no combustible cross members linking to the structure.

The area from 5 to 30 feet from structures should be *Lean, Clean and Green*. This zone is described on pages 44 to 47 of the Home Landscaping Guide and on page 16 of “Living With Fire--A Guide for the Homeowner, Lake Tahoe Basin” (Second Edition). For larger properties, the upper left box in Table 3 on page 46 has been changed from 30 to 100 feet. Specific changes to the management of the 5 to 30 foot zone are described below.

Use of Combustible Organic Mulches

Combustible mulches include, but are not limited to pine needles, wood chips, shredded cedar and shredded tires. To improve the effectiveness of defensible space practices, the Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe no longer recommends widespread use of combustible organic mulches within 30 feet of structures. Fallen needles and leaves covering bare ground should be raked up in the spring by May 1st. Fallen needles and leaves lying within the 5 foot noncombustible zone should be routinely removed. Wood and bark mulches can be used in the Lean, Clean, and Green area but not in a widespread manner. They should be separated by noncombustible materials and arranged so that they could not allow a fire to travel rapidly across the area to a structure. These changes supersede previous recommendations for mulches on pages 12, 15, 16, 47, 54, 116 and 117.

Thinning of Trees and Shrubs

The Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe recommends thinning of dense stands of trees and shrubs within 30 feet of structures (pp. 8, 13, Chapter 5, p. 56). In 2007, the TRPA changed rules for removal of trees. It is now legal to remove trees up to 14 inches in diameter at breast height (measured 4 ½ feet off the ground) without a TRPA tree removal permit. This rule change does not apply to trees that are in wetlands or near streams (i.e., Stream Environment Zones) or in backshore areas. Before removing any trees for defensible space purposes, however, the homeowner should get the local fire protection district to mark trees appropriate for removal. This rule supersedes recommendations on page 63 of the Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe.

Spacing of shrubs and trees

Native live trees and shrubs in the 5-30 foot zone should be thinned to provide a separation between crowns in accordance with state and local fire codes. This supersedes recommendations shown on page 50 of the Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe. Flammable shrubs should be substantially reduced in this area. Individual specimens or small group plantings of these plants may be retained so long as they are kept healthy and vigorous; are pruned to reduce height and fuel load; and arranged so that they would not allow a fire to travel rapidly across the area. Low-growing native shrubs, such as pinemat manzanita and Mahala mat, can be retained.

Removal of Ladder fuels

Tree canopies should be raised by removing low branches to a height of at least 10 feet. Shrubs and trees should be removed from under the tree drip line. This rule supersedes the recommendations on page 51 of the Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe. Removal of tree branches should not exceed one third of the total tree height.

Planting Vegetation to Control Soil Erosion

Homeowners should rake up fallen needles and leaves within 30 feet of structures by May 1st each spring prior to fire season. Bare ground may be present in this zone after needles have been raked. Needles and leaves that fall after the spring removal period can accumulate as long as they do not create a fire hazard.

In areas of bare soil, TRPA recommends planting and maintaining vegetation. It is important to select plants according to the recommendations on pp. 51-53 in the "Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe and Vicinity." Property owners should consult with their local Fire Protection District before proceeding to vegetate bare soil within 30 feet of structures. Choose plants with a "low fire hazard" rating in the matrix of TRPA recommended plants in Chapter 7. They should be arranged so that they would not allow fire to travel rapidly into a structure. Choose low-growing, herbaceous (non-woody) plants like turf, erosion control grasses, flowers or succulents. After they turn brown in late summer, herbaceous plants and grasses should be cut down, and the top growth should be removed. See note 1 on each page of the plant lists in Chapter 7.

In order to get erosion control grasses or other herbaceous plants established, you should plant the seeds in spring or late fall, four to six weeks before the first snow. If you plant in the spring, rake the pine needles off the site and prepare the ground in late April. Follow the planting recommendations on pp. 102 to 104 in the guide. The site will need daily watering for at least 4-6 weeks, and then every-other-day watering until seedlings are established (perhaps two summers). Please see the UNCE publication SP-09-07, "Choosing Turf and Erosion Control Grasses for the Lake Tahoe Basin" for more details. It is available online at: <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/nr/2009/sp0907.pdf>.

Additional information about Defensible Space and BMPs

For more information about creating defensible space and BMPs in an integrated fashion, please see the UNCE publication, "Living With Fire—A Guide for the Homeowner, Lake Tahoe Basin" (Second Edition). Please ask your local fire protection district or conservation district if you need copies of this publication, or view it online at: <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/nr/2006/sp0611.pdf>. Read a brochure about combining defensible space with BMPs at: <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/nr/2008/fs0826.pdf>, or consult Chapter 6 of "How to Install Residential Scale Best Management Practices (BMPs) at: <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/nr/2011/cm1102.pdf> . To keep track of potential future changes in these recommendations, consult www.trpa.org .