Time to Start Firewising!

By Catesby Suter, MS Botany, Firewise Board Member

Late winter in Oracle often means unpredictable weather, but one thing is certain, this summer will be hot and it's not too early to start reducing fire risk around your home. The exceptional bounty of the 2021 monsoon created a super-growth event where grass and annual herbs grew waist high and long dormant seeds sprouted plants that hadn't been seen in Oracle for decades. While it was amazing to live in all that jungle-like splendor, the verdant growth has aged and dried, becoming a thick underbrush of fuel, just waiting for an ignition source. Before that happens, get out your string trimmer and get to work! If possible, work to keep dry, dead grass and annual plants cut down to 4" in areas within 30 feet of your home. Pay attention to tall dry grass under trees with low branches.

Although grass fires are generally fast moving, several years of dry summers and higher than usual temperatures have left trees and woody shrubs in poor condition. Drier slopes have lost up to 20% of their manzanita, many oak trees have more dead branches than living, some have even started resprouting from the base of the trunk. A grass fire can easily climb the ladder of low branches to reach into the tree canopy. When all that dead wood meets an unchecked grass fire, the fire can easily escalate. We all need to do our part to keep Oracle "Firewise" and ensure our community stays safe from wildfires.

You would be prudent to wait until frost danger has passed to prune frost tender shrubs, but it is always time to prune out dead material from a tree or bush. You can tell how if a branch is dead by gently bending a small twig or branch – if it is brittle and breaks easily, it is dead. If it is still pliable, that indicates that it is still alive. You can also use your fingernail to gently scratch through the young bark on twigs – do you see any evidence of green? Pliable twigs and branches with green directly under the bark are still alive. Don't expect dead branches and twigs to regenerate – once the living cells that transport nutrients are dead, they remain dead.

You may be concerned that pruning will disturb nesting birds. Look for signs of nesting birds, including bird traffic back and forth to the nest, and birds acting agitated when you are close to the nest. If you find a nest in a tree or shrub you would need to prune, be patient. Most birds lay eggs within 2 weeks of making a nest, and most eggs will hatch within 2-3 weeks of being laid. Give your hatchlings another 3-4 weeks to fledge, and then prune to remove the dead growth.

Take your dried brush and tree trimmings to the Oracle Brush Dump, which is open to all Oracle residents. Although Saddlebrooke Ranch has the same zip code, is not within the Oracle Fire District boundaries and therefore, not eligible to use the brush dump. Visit the Oracle Fire District and sign up to use the brush dump and take advantage of $5 loads for a pickup, $10 for a pickup and trailer and $20 for a dump truck. The brush dump is open from 8am-4:45pm Tuesday through Saturday. Thank you for being Firewise and reducing the risk of wildfire in our community!

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