

Balancing Fire Protection and Native Vegetation

Early every winter, after all the leaves have fallen and most other things have turned brown, it is a signal for me to do a little annual clean-up. Since the good rains we had in 2016, especially in the fall, the amount of vegetation we had around the yard was much greater this year than usual.

Since we live in the country, prudence dictates that we try to protect our home in the event of a wildfire, and one of the main ways to do that is to cut back on all dead vegetation out some distance from the house. The point is to make a “defensible space” between the pasture and the house. That is, the area around the house where, should a wildfire catch the vegetation around the house, it would not give rise to large enough flames to catch the house.

The flame height and intensity of a fire can easily be three times the height of the vegetation that is burning, so tall grass, brown forbs and shrubs near the house, should they catch fire, could easily catch the house or porches around it. If the vegetation is cut back short, the likelihood of that is greatly reduced.

Tall, fine fuel things like six-foot tall switchgrass could create a huge flame if left upright. The same goes for tall perennials such as tall prairie goldenrod and Turk’s cap, as well as some evergreen shrubs. Some of the worst of the latter are Agarita, yaupon, and non-native rosemary, all of which burn vigorously.

We have a number of native ornamental grasses, both those we planted and those that came up as volunteers, around the house. Those were the first things I cut back. The next things were the taller forbs and shrubs next to the house.

This time of year is also a good time to look around at any vegetation that has grown too large for its space or is crowding out more desirable things or is too close to the house.

The forest service doesn’t consider our native hardwood trees to be a great threat in a wildfire because of the structure of the branches and lack of volatile oils. Pine trees and cedar, on the other hand, because of the fine needles and presence of oils, are a real hazard, especially in dry times, and should be kept well away from any buildings.

For those of us who like to encourage the growth of native plants as well as to maintain a good habitat for native wildlife, there is a lot of compromise involved in how to manage the vegetation and still protect our houses.

Good land management would be to grow many different species of native plants and to let those with seed still attached stand throughout the winter to feed birds. It would also be to recycle all vegetation like Mother Nature would, letting cuttings fall and decay in place and leaving leaves unraked under trees. Everyone has to decide where on the scale of compromise between nature and fire protection they want to be.

For me, it is to leave leaves where they lay in most all areas, but not against the house, to mow all grass short after it has turned brown, to cut the stems of tall forbs and shrubs near the house, to rake up large cuttings and tall grass cuttings and remove them. The further from the house the more native the vegetation can be in the winter.

Some people may cut back more severely further from the house that I would, others might take more chances with more vegetation closer to the house. But you don't have to surround your house with gravel or concrete or cacti to have a safe space.

One thing to remember is that rural fire departments are significantly further in time and distance from your house than for folks in the city. And in the country, there are no fire hydrants and thus they have a lot less water to fight a fire.

I am comfortable that we protect our home at the same time that we live in the midst of a small native habitat oasis full of many different species of native plants and frequented by many native animals. But it is smart to give both safety and nature some consideration.

Until next time...

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