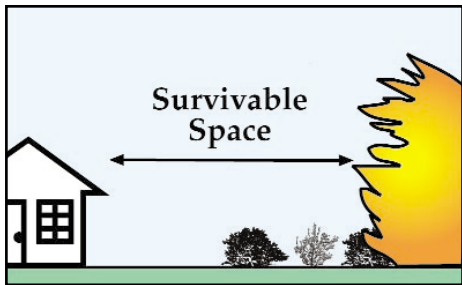


# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SURVIVABLE SPACE



More and more homes are being built in high fire hazard environments.

In 2000, the term “survivable space” was coined to describe vegetation management practices aimed at reducing the wildfire threat to homes. This article responds to some of the commonly asked questions about survivable space.



## WHAT IS SURVIVABLE SPACE?

Survivable space is the area between a house and an oncoming wildfire where the vegetation has been modified to reduce the wildfire threat and to provide an opportunity for firefighters to effectively defend the house. Sometimes a survivable space is simply a homeowner’s properly maintained yard.

## WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VEGETATION AND WILDFIRE THREAT?

Many people do not view the plants growing on their property as a threat. But in terms of wildfire, the vegetation adjacent to their homes can have considerable influence upon their survivability. All vegetation, including plants native to the area as well as ornamental plants, is potential wildfire fuel. If vegetation is properly modified and maintained, a wildfire can be slowed, the length of flames shortened, and the amount of

heat reduced, all of which assist firefighters to defend the home against an oncoming wildfire.

## THE FIRE DEPARTMENT IS SUPPOSED TO PROTECT MY HOUSE, SO WHY BOTHER WITH SURVIVABLE SPACE?

Some individuals incorrectly assume that a fire engine will be parked in their driveway and firefighters will be actively defending their homes if a wildfire approaches. During a major wildfire, it is unlikely there will be enough fire fighting resources available to defend every home. In these instances, firefighters will likely select homes they can most safely and effectively protect. Even with adequate resources, some wildfires may be so intense that there may be little firefighters can do to prevent a house from burning. The key is to reduce fire intensity as the wildfire nears the house. This can be accomplished by reducing the amount of flammable vegetation surrounding a home. Consequently, the most important person in protecting a house from wildfire is not a firefighter, but the property owner. It is the action taken by the owner before the wildfire occurs (such as proper landscaping) that is most critical.

## DOES SURVIVABLE SPACE REQUIRE A LOT OF BARE GROUND IN MY LANDSCAPE?

No. Unfortunately, many people have this misconception. While bare ground is certainly effective in reducing the wildfire threat, it may be unnecessary and unacceptable due to appearance, soil erosion, and other reasons. Many homes have attractive, well vegetated landscapes that also serve as effective survivable space.

## DOES CREATING A SURVIVABLE SPACE REQUIRE ANY SPECIAL SKILLS OR EQUIPMENT?

No. For the most part, creating a survivable space employs routine gardening and landscape maintenance practices, such as: pruning, mowing, weeding, plant removal, appropriate plant selection, and irrigation. Equipment needed includes common tools

such as: chain saw, pruning saw, pruning shear, lopper, weed-eater, shovel and rake. A chipper, compost bin, or a large rented trash dumpster may be useful in disposing of unwanted plant material.

## HOW BIG IS AN EFFECTIVE SURVIVABLE SPACE?

Survivable space size is not the same for everyone, but varies by slope and type of wildland vegetation growing near the house. See the article entitled “Creating An Effective Survivable Space” for specific information.

## DOES SURVIVABLE SPACE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Yes. Investigations of homes threatened by wildfire indicate that houses with an effective survivable space are much more likely to survive a wildfire. Furthermore, homes with both an effective survivable space and a nonflammable roof (composition shingles, tile, metal, etc.) are many times more likely to survive a wildfire than those without survivable space and flammable roofs (wood shakes or shingles). Survivable space gives firefighters the opportunity to effectively and safely defend the home.

## DOES HAVING A SURVIVABLE SPACE GUARANTEE MY HOUSE WILL SURVIVE A WILDFIRE?

No. Under extreme conditions, almost any house can burn. But having a survivable space will significantly improve the odds of your home surviving a wildfire.

## WHY DOESN'T EVERYONE LIVING IN A HIGH WILDFIRE HAZARD AREA CREATE A SURVIVABLE SPACE?

The specific reasons for not creating a survivable space are varied. Some individuals believe “it won’t happen to me.” Others think the costs (time, money, effort, loss of privacy, etc.) outweigh the benefits. Some fail to implement survivable space practices simply because of lack of knowledge or misconceptions.

HOW DO I CHANGE THE VEGETATION ON MY PROPERTY OR REDUCE THE WILDFIRE THREAT? The objective of survivable space is to reduce the wildfire threat to a home by changing the characteristics of the adjacent vegetation.

Survivable space practices include:

- increasing the moisture content of vegetation.
- decreasing the amount of flammable vegetation.
- shortening plant height.
- altering the arrangement of plants.

This is accomplished through the “Three Rs of Survivable Space.” The article “Creating an Effective Survivable Space” provides detailed information about changing vegetation characteristics of survivable space.

## THE THREE Rs OF SURVIVABLE SPACE

### Removal

This technique involves the elimination of entire plants, particularly trees and shrubs, from the site. Examples of removal are cutting down a dead tree or cutting out a flammable shrub.

### Reduction

The removal of plant parts, such as branches or leaves, constitutes reduction. Examples of reduction are pruning dead wood from a shrub, removing low tree branches, and mowing dried grass.

### Replacement

Replacement is substituting hazardous vegetation with less flammable plants. Removal of a dense stand of flammable shrubs and planting an irrigated, well maintained flower bed is an example of replacement.