



## Are You Firewise?

*(Author's Note: This is the sixteenth in a series of articles by members of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee dealing with vegetative matters of concern to island residents. Members of the Vegetation Committee are Sanibel residents appointed by City Council for one-year terms. To be considered for appointment, contact the City Manager's Office at (239) 472-3700.)*

Fire is a natural process in Florida. Historically, natural fires ignited by lightning occurred most often in the spring and summer. However, fires are possible in any month of the year. Lee County is currently experiencing moderate to severe drought conditions and on Sanibel our lush vegetation is quickly becoming tinder-dry, therefore increasing the risk of wildfires.



The Florida Forest Service's (FFS) Fire Danger Index (FDI) as of May 8, 2017. The FFS uses the FDI for estimating the potential for fire to start and require suppression action on any given day. Updated once every day at 4:45 p.m. eastern standard time.

Fortunately, the City of Sanibel and its partners have an active wildfire reduction program where dried vegetation or "fuel" is reduced through the practice of prescribed burning. This tool reduces fuel loads by purposely burning dead vegetation through controlled burning techniques to minimize fuel buildup before it becomes a problem. This lessens the intensity of a wildfire if it were to occur.

The rainy season is right around the corner, but so is the height of the Florida fire season. Historically, native Florida habitats are prone to wildfires ignited by lightning produced by the first few weeks of afternoon storms in the late Spring to early Summer before naturally wet areas are inundated. It is important to protect and prepare your yard and home from fire as you would for hurricanes.

Some key things to do:

- Clean dead vegetative debris from around your yard.
- Keep pine straw away from the foundation of your house. Consider mulch as an alternative.
- Do not allow palms or palmetto to grow close to your house and keep dry fronds trimmed.
- Use plants that are fire resistant when planting within 30 feet of the house.
- Remove all debris, such as dead leaves and twigs, from gutters.
- Prune trees so that the lowest branches are 6-10 feet from the ground.
- Consider shade trees that will create a canopy and increase humidity around the house.
- Remove any “ladder fuels”, such as vines, that may carry ground fires upward.
- Do not allow large groups of highly flammable plants, such as saw palmetto and wax myrtle, to grow near decks or overhangs.
- Keep at least 30 feet of defensible space (either turf grass or fire resistant plants) between your home and dense vegetation.

Fire resistant plants have a high moisture content. Also, plants that are low growing, compact, and require less water and maintenance are good choices. Typically, their stems and leaves are not resinous.



Examples of firewise plants. From left to right: gaillardia, American beautyberry, red maple, and sweet acacia.  
Photos taken from the Atlas of Florida Plants Institute of Systematic Botany

Some examples of trees, shrubs, and groundcovers that are firewise choices include:

**Trees:** Jamaica dogwood (*Piscidia piscipula*), sweet bay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*), oaks (*Quercus* spp.), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), sea grape (*Coccoloba uvifera*), satin leaf (*Chrysophyllum oliviforme*), sweet acacia (*Acacia farnesiana*), green buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*), myrsine (*Rapanea punctata*), and Florida privet (*Forestiera segregate*)

**Shrubs:** American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), coontie (*Zamia pumila*), and wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*)

**Groundcovers:** native ferns, mimosa (*Mimosa strigillosa*), and gaillardia (*Gaillardia pulchella*)

**Avoid:** wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), gallberry (*Ilex glabra*), yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*), red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), and sabal palm (*Sabal palmetto*)

To learn more about how to be a firewise community please visit the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services: <http://www.freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service/For-Communities/Firewise-Communities>

To view pictures of these plants or the City’s “The Alien Invasion” brochure, visit the City’s website at <http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/Natural-Resources/Vegetation-Information/Exotic-Vegetation/Other-Invasive-Exotic-Vegetation> or contact the City’s Natural Resources Department at 472-3700.

To read other Vegetation Committee articles in this series please visit the City of Sanibel’s Natural Resources Department website: <http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/Natural-Resources>