

# Creating Defensible Space: Homeowner Values and Actions



## “Natural Environments for Urban Populations”

A research work  
unit of the USDA  
Forest Service  
North Central  
Research Station

1033 University  
Place, Suite 360  
Evanston, IL  
60201-3172

847-866-9311

For more  
information,  
contact  
Sarah  
McCaffrey  
(x 20)



**Lead Researchers: Kristen Nelson, U of Minnesota, and Martha Monroe, U of Florida**

Across the U.S., wildfires strain the resources of many forestry and fire agencies and place residents at risk.

**Residents can reduce their own fire vulnerability by creating defensible (i.e. fire-resistant) space around their homes through vegetation management.** Yet homeowners vary in how much they are willing to do – if anything – to create and maintain defensible space.

We wanted to help resource managers **understand what shapes people’s decisions to use or not use defensible space.** To do this, we conducted in-depth interviews with homeowners in Minnesota and Florida about their values and beliefs about effective wildfire preparedness. We also studied how their stated values and beliefs were reflected in their landscaping practices.

Landscape management decisions are complex, but this study revealed that **values like privacy, naturalness, aesthetics, and wildlife can influence homeowners’ vegetation management decisions.** Privacy — the ability to not be seen or to have a sense of solitude — was something that many homeowners said was central to their home’s value. A “natural” view through the windows was also important. Beliefs about privacy and naturalness tended to be strongly reflected in the landscaping around people’s homes. Residents with homes in “deep woods” or “neaten woods” were most likely to comment on the importance of a natural landscape; those who lived in more open or more actively landscaped areas put less emphasis on naturalness. **What people considered “natural” was also quite varied.** Landscaping that is seen as natural in Florida may be seen as a sign of the city in Minnesota. Many people also said that the ability to see wildlife and/or provide wildlife habitat was an important part of a natural landscape. **It is notable that many homeowners cleared vegetation for reasons not related to wildfire risk.** For example, Florida residents reported that they cleared vegetation because they liked having a lawn, in order to see snakes, or to keep pine needles out of the pool.

During the study, it became clear that homeowner landscape management is ever-changing; in other words, most landscapes will change if homeowners do not make further decisions and take additional management action. Fire managers and educators can take advantage of this dynamic in several ways. **Messages about the benefits of defensible space should continue as current homeowners mold their landscapes to reflect their values and as new residents move into an area. When communicating with property owners, fire managers and community leaders should emphasize how defensible space techniques can support cherished landscape values.** Educational campaigns can also clear up misunderstandings or provide additional information to encourage homeowner action.

**Related publications:** Monroe, M.C. and K.C. Nelson. 2004. “The Value of Assessing Public Perceptions: Wildland Fire and Defensible Space. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication* 3(2): 109-117.

Nelson, K.C.; M.C. Monroe; J.F. Johnson; A. Bowers. 2004. Living with fire: homeowner assessment of landscape values and defensible space in Minnesota and Florida, USA. *International Journal of Wildland Fire* 13: 413-425.

Nelson, K.C., M.C. Monroe, and J.F. Johnson. 2005. The look of the land: Homeowner landscape management and wildfire preparedness in Minnesota and Florida. *Society & Natural Resources* 18: 321-336.



Photo-simulations show alternative landscaping options around the same house.

