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# Guest View: Landscaping can promote fire safety

BY SHELLY BARNES,

Living at Lake Tahoe, we are fortunate to be surrounded by astonishing natural beauty and are privileged to contribute to environmental health and wildfire safety with our home landscapes. Conservation landscaping is perfect for Lake Tahoe, because it integrates the similarities that exist between water conservation, defensible space and erosion control best management practices (BMPs). From native landscapes that feature columbine, aspen and lupine, to fire-wise gardens with a mosaic of grass and planter beds, there is a lot of free landscaping advice available at local utility districts, fire departments and environmental agencies. Consider these helpful tips:

## Planning and design

Planning and design are important for new landscaping projects, as well as relandscaping. Look around your yard and evaluate things like sun exposure. You may find a correlation between a brown patch of grass and a shady area.

What type of soil is found in your yard? Most soils in Tahoe are decomposed granite, which results in a porous soil that has a limited water-holding capacity.

What function would you like your landscape to serve? Is it a play area for children, or a decorative zone for birds and butterflies, or are you looking for low maintenance?

Where are the defensible-space zones? There are specific landscape requirements for fire safety within 5 feet, 30 feet and 100 feet from all structures. Certain plants, trees and shrubs, such as juniper, are highly flammable and can only be placed well away from homes and decks. Pick up a free copy of the "Living With Fire Guide" and ask for a free defensible-space inspection at any fire department. The Nevada Fire Safe Council can also advise you and can tell you about rebates that are available for defensible-space work in both states.

## Soil

After assessing your landscape design, take a look at the most fundamental aspect of any garden project: your soil. Amending your soil with organic material, such as compost, helps the soil retain more water and requires less fertilizer. Even if your property is miles from Lake Tahoe, using too much fertilizer allows unused nutrients to enter the groundwater and contributes to algae growth in the lake.

## Plant selection

Native and adapted plants are most preferable, as they require little maintenance and thrive during our dry, alpine summers. A list of native and adapted plants can be found in the "Home Landscaping Guide for Lake Tahoe" offered for free at South Tahoe Public Utility District and your local conservation district, or you can get an electronic copy at [www.trpa.org](http://www.trpa.org).

Also consider placement of plants. For example, low, irrigated herbaceous plants or decorative gravel are excellent options for the 5-foot, noncombustible defensible-space zone around your house and works for stormwater runoff, too. If planning for a planter bed, selecting plants with similar watering needs means you only need one sprinkler zone. While decorative bulb plants like tulips are beautiful and attract bees and birds, you may want to shy away if voles, moles and squirrels rule your backyard kingdom.

Taking the time to consider the fire hazard and the function and placement of plants helps reduce the threat of wildfire as well as your own frustration down the road.

## Watering

Many people are enamored with manicured green lawns, but that is rapidly changing in the arid West. Lawn areas

help provide defensible space, play areas for children and pets, and can be integral to a comprehensive landscaping plan. However, lawns are also the most water-intensive landscaping option a homeowner can choose and should be minimized. Nonfunctional lawns - ones that are rarely used - waste water and represent an ongoing cost in both time and resources. Creating a mosaic pattern of practical lawn areas, mixed with low-maintenance planter beds, allows for a beautiful yard that thoroughly integrates defensible space, erosion control and water conservation.

After designing your landscape and purchasing seed or plants, take the time to set up an efficient irrigation system. Utilizing drip irrigation, soaker hoses and fine misters in planter beds reduces water use. Spray irrigation systems that cater to grass areas can be set to water a half-inch per application, three days a week during the summer. Pick up a free watering gauge at STPUD, or set a tin can in your yard and measure the water after a cycle. More than a half-inch in the can is too much. Watering before 7 a.m. reduces the loss of water through evaporation and wind displacement. Watering the right day and the right way keeps your landscape green, while conserving water.

For more information on how to transform your yard into a beautiful conservation landscape, pick up or download a free copy of the fire guide and the landscaping guide, or call your resource conservation district for a free vegetation consultation. Call the Nevada Fire Safe Council, which works on both sides of the basin, at (877) LT-NVFSC. California residents can call the Tahoe Resource Conservation District at (530) 543-1501; Nevada residents can call the Nevada Tahoe Conservation District at (775) 586-1610.

- Shelly Barnes is the water conservation specialist for the South Tahoe Public Utility District.

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