

Wildfire Safety A Priority In Sun City

By Kylie Ebersole

Sun City Texas, located in a climate susceptible to wildfire due to ongoing and extended drought conditions in central Texas, is becoming nationally known for its entirely voluntary Firewise program. The program's main objective is to encourage people to be proactive and

take recommended steps to lessen the possibility of wildfire in their suburban communities. The program is sponsored by the National Fire Protection Agency and partners with the Texas A&M Forest Service, Firewise Communities/USA, and the Georgetown Fire Department who is also interested in implementing it

into the City of Georgetown.

Sun City residents Paul Ohlenbusch and Dan Dodson are responsible for the program's progress in gaining national recognition. Firewise Training Coordinator, Paul, gained the bulk of his fire knowledge through his career as the Extension Grassland management specialist for Kansas State University where he developed an education program for prescribed fire using workshops and demonstrations. Dan, Firewise Education Coordinator, is a retired emergency services district commissioner for Harris County and a volunteer fireman. The two now volunteer their decades of combined knowledge and experience to lead the community to the fire-conscious environment it is today. Paul and Dan also pride themselves on continuing education to ensure they bring the most current information to the table; this research is never ending and continues to get better as time goes by.

Firewise communities boast more than 10 percent less fire damage than non-Firewise communities, and Sun City

has put standard requirements in place for the homes throughout the community. There are no wood fences, wood shingles, or woodpiles allowed, helping to decrease the possibility of a home catching fire. Because of the proven increased safety of implementing this program, as of June 1, 2015, USAA offers a discount to all policy holders living in a Firewise community, regardless of whether they are a participant of the program.

Sun City's Firewise program, consisting solely of volunteer evaluators and educators, takes wild fire prevention education a step further by providing evaluations and lists of plants and their burn rating. It includes instruction on how far to plant from the house, how tall or full plants should be, and what kind of mulch is best for fire prevention. Residents can request an HIZ (Home Ignition Zone) evaluation free of cost. A qualified volunteer will come out, evaluate the exterior property for fire hazards, and give a report on what should be done to decrease the possibility of the home catching fire.

Educators have a display at the new resident orientation every three months, so new Sun Citians can learn about the program as soon as they move in. For anyone interested in becoming an evaluator, training is conducted twice yearly, and consists of six hours of training. After training, volunteers will be accompanied by experienced personnel on five evaluations to be sure they are sufficiently trained; continuing education is required every two years. The group also holds an annual town hall meeting to refresh residents and offer opportunities to participate.

May 6, 2016 will be the third annual Firewise Wildfire Preparedness Day. All residents are invited and encouraged

to come out and help with a clearing project within in Sun City. Last year, the Georgetown Fire Department brought their big chainsaws for heavier clearing and is expected to help out again.

For more information, visit SCTexas.org, click on "About Us" at the top, then click on "Firewise" from the list on the left side on the page.

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Mark your calendars:

January 29 - Firewise Landscape Service Provider Training (by invitation)

May 6 - Wildfire Preparedness Day

April 28 - HIZ Training and Continuing Education

October 4 - Firewise Town Hall

October 27 - HIZ Training and Continuing Education

Did You Know?

The Insurance Institute of Business and Home Safety has conducted studies on fire behavior to determine why a fire might get so large, its burn patterns, or why it burns so hot. After the Bastrop fires in 2011 and 2015, for example, researchers studied reasons for patch burning. Why does a fire burn in one area, skip another, and then burn in another? Most would not consider a relationship between flooding and wildfire, but they go hand in hand as debris left from flooding can be a major source of fuel for a spreading fire. Wind patterns, underbrush, and small trees are all culprits, but the most common factor is wind-blown embers from a nearby fire. This information proves to be instrumental in protecting a home and community from the possibility of burning. Simply removing debris and other types of fuel from around your home and surrounding areas can greatly reduce your risk of fire.



An example of maintaining shrubs based on Firewise concepts by keeping them 6-12" from the wall.

Top: Sun City Firewise volunteers remove small Ashe Juniper (Cedar) seedlings under a tree. • The 2015 Wildfire Preparedness Day crew including the Georgetown Fire Department Wildland Crew.