



FIRE BREAK - JUNE 26, 2020



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Summer fires raise awareness about how to keep mulch decorative and not destructive

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A [handful of mulch fires in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island](#), has led the Office of the Fire Marshal to educate residents about where to place mulch, how to maintain it, and how to keep it from igniting in dry weather. The heightened fire-safety awareness comes after mulch-ignited fires separately destroyed an apartment building and a hotel in the province last summer.

Laura King, NFPA's public-education representative in Canada shared with me that "Canadians have been at home and doing lots of gardening as COVID-19 restricts movement. So much so that many retailers have sold out of mulch or are low on stock." Laura further explained "While mulch makes our gardens look lovely, homeowners should avoid putting it immediately adjacent to structures – homes, sheds or even wooden fences – and keep it free of debris. More importantly, smoking material should never be discarded in mulch, which can be highly combustible."

While mulch has many positive attributes - it reduces the water requirements of plants, cools the soil temperature, controls weeds and soil erosion, and visually enhances the landscape - a major drawback is that many types of mulch can be combustible, which presents a huge problem in fire prone areas. Embers from an

approaching wildfire can ignite areas where mulch is used. If these areas are adjacent to the home, it could be wind up to be a disastrous mix. Previous [research on mulch combustibility provides guidance on placement and proper maintenance](#) to reduce fire risk.

As many localities across the US and Canada have learned, a smoldering wildfire ember bringing flame and heat to a combustible material can also be as simple as a carelessly discarded cigarette under the right weather conditions. The town of Harrisonburg, VA, in [2015 banned combustible landscape materials](#) from within 18 inches of apartment blocks, businesses, and industrial buildings that have combustible siding.

To advance your own fire safety messaging around mulch risks this summer, NFPA has [valuable messaging focused on risks from cigarettes and their proper disposal](#) in and around buildings. The NFPA [Educational Messages Desk Reference also shares vetted and concise social behavioral change language](#) you can use in your outreach. This includes language highlighting:

- The proper disposal of cigarettes around landscaping (Chapter 11, page 23); and
- The ignition risk to mulch and appropriate distancing of combustible materials from the edges of structures (Chapter 17, page 28)

While mulch can be used around your property, consider using gravel, stones, low-flammability and well-maintained plants, or other non-combustible decorative accents for your ground cover in that 0-5 foot zone (1-2 meters) around structures so possible flames do not touch. Moreover, [make sure to keep this area clean of seasonal debris](#).

Visit NFPA's [Preparing Homes for Wildfire resources page](#) to learn more about this "immediate zone" around structures and how you can keep them safe from any materials that can spread a flame.

Photo Credit: Megan Fitzgerald-McGowan, NFPA

As we navigate the evolving situation with COVID-19, NFPA remains committed to supporting you with the resources you need to minimize risk and help prevent loss, injuries, and death from fire, electrical, and other hazards. For information on NFPA's response to the coronavirus, please [visit our webpage](#).

Follow [NFPA's FireBreak blog](#) and you can also follow me on twitter [@LucianNFPA](#) for more international wildfire and policy related topics.

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