

# DESERT PRESERVATION AND FIRE PROTECTION GUIDE





## PURPOSE

Several neighborhoods throughout Phoenix are characterized by their proximity to the natural desert. Many of these neighborhoods were explicitly designed to integrate with the environment by preserving wash corridors or installing native landscaping in common areas and along the street. Most of the time, the connection between these neighborhoods and the natural desert is very positive; residents and property owners take pride in and are responsible for their development's undisturbed environs.

However, during drought conditions, when high winds and dry vegetation fuel and catalyze wildfires, neighborhoods rightfully become concerned over potential property damage and safety, particularly when the natural desert abuts or traverses the neighborhood.

The Desert Preservation and Fire Protection Guide provides guidance that ensures natural open space preservation and appropriate wildland fire protection. This guide was created to assist residents, property owners, homeowners' associations (HOA) who maintain natural open space areas within a residential subdivision, and other property owners for non-single-family development. Natural open space protects and preserves significant open areas for public enjoyment and provides connections.





## DEFENSIBLE SPACE

Defensible space is an area, either natural or man-made, where material capable of allowing a fire to spread unchecked has been treated, cleared, or modified to slow the rate and intensity of an advancing wildfire and create an area for fire suppression operation. Sometimes, a defensible space is simply a homeowner's adequately maintained private yard.

Homeowners, property owners, lessees, and contractors should create a well-maintained, live vegetation space to prevent damage to structures in case of wildland fires. This "defensible space" acts as a fire break and should contain only small brush, cacti, and trees to prevent a continuous path of flammable materials leading to inhabited structures.

Please check with your Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC&Rs), Home Owners Association (HOA), and/or obtain property owner permission before creating a Defensible Space beyond the lot's boundaries.





## TOP TIPS FOR FIRE PREVENTION

- Consistently monitor defensible space for maximum fire prevention within 30 feet of the structure.
- Trim trees within a 30-foot defensible space on a residential lot so the canopy is not touching the ground; remove any dead branches or leaves.
- Trim grass and foliage around trees.
- Remove dead grass or invasive weeds such as Stinknet.
- Keep gutters, eaves, and roofs clear of leaves and other debris.
- Do not stack wood or other flammable materials within the 30-foot defensible space.
- Keep a rolled-up garden hose with a nozzle attached to an outside hose valve connection.
- Do not smoke in natural open space areas.
- Consistently monitor the defensible space for maximum fire prevention.
- Backwashing pools into preserves, alleys, or other city property is not permitted. It is illegal and promotes the growth of unwanted vegetation.

**Be vigilant! Please help prevent wildland fires in your community. Look for signs indicating the Fire Danger Level throughout the year. Create a defensible space to protect you and your property and prepare for this fire season.**





## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **What are natural open space areas?**
  - For this guide, natural open space areas are common for all residents, as described in the dedication statement of the subdivision. Natural open space is either a natural desert undisturbed by development activity or where development has restored the desert terrain and vegetation to its natural condition.
- **Who has jurisdiction over natural open space areas?**
  - The city of Phoenix, the HOA, or the property owner whose development includes a scenic corridor or other naturally designated open space have jurisdiction over the natural open space areas. The city's jurisdiction over the natural open space areas deals with enforcement of the Zoning Ordinance and any zoning stipulations that may have been imposed on the property. The HOA or property owner is responsible for regularly maintaining the natural open space areas and enforcing any Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CCRs).



- **Can/should dead vegetation such as trees and shrubs be removed from the natural open space areas for fire protection?**
  - No. Natural wash corridors and associated vegetation should be preserved as open space amenities and wildlife habitat corridors. Sonoran Desert wildlife is dependent on the habitat created by the natural environment. Dead trees, fallen saguaros, and low growth on trees provide cover for a variety of native wildlife<sup>1</sup>. For example, if a small tree dies, it is part of the natural landscape and should remain. Any natural landscaping on a residential lot within 30 feet of a built structure (such as a home or shed, but not a view fence or wall) should be pruned and maintained to minimize fire danger<sup>2</sup>. Hillside or preservation lots should be constructed in accordance with the approved site plan.

<sup>1</sup>Phoenix Zoning Ordinance: Section 507 Tab A.II.A.1.1.2, 507 Tab A.II.A.2.2.8, and 507 Tab A.II.A.3.2.1

<sup>2</sup>National Fire Protection Association Standard #299





## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Can new vegetation, such as trees and shrubs, be planted in these areas?**
  - Supplemental natural desert vegetation may be planted on private property - no planting on public property or preserve land. Installation techniques should be utilized, which have a minimal impact on preserving existing resources. Please note that the CCRs or other property restrictions may also include a list of plant species allowed for subdivision.
- **Can areas next to view fences be cleared to allow painters access to repaint fences? If so, how far from the fences can be removed?**
  - Natural open space areas should not be cleared pursuant to Design Guideline 507 Tab A.II.A.3.2.1 of the Phoenix Zoning Ordinance. Temporary staking or “pulling back” of vegetation can be used for routine maintenance, such as painting fences.
- **What is the homeowner's responsibility if their house backs up to a preserve area?**
  - Homeowners are encouraged to create a 10-foot-trimmed area from the back of their fence into the preserve. All trimmed material should be removed from the area and not left on the ground or thrown deeper into the preserve. HOAs may provide this service. Please get in touch with your HOA for further information.
- **Can these areas have irrigation?**
  - New vegetation can utilize supplemental irrigation; however, supplemental irrigation lines should be configured to minimize disturbances to the existing natural desert.
- **Are there maps that show different types of natural open space areas within my community?**
  - Plat maps represent a tract of land showing the boundaries and location of individual properties, open space tracts, and streets. Final recorded plats are available from the Maricopa County Assessor's Office at [maricopa.gov](http://maricopa.gov). For more information, please get in touch with the Maricopa County Assessor's Office at 602-506-3406.
- **Who is responsible for drainage ways?**
  - The responsibility for drainage ways varies between the Street Transportation Department and the property owner or homeowner's association. Street Transportation is responsible for maintaining flood conveyance channels and natural washes under its control area or notifying/coordinating with the responsible party. Street Transportation will assist in determining responsibility. Call 602-262-6441 to request assistance with a flood conveyance channel or wash.
  - Where the Street Transportation Department maintains the flood conveyance channel, it will manage vegetation and trees to keep the drainage way open for stormwater conveyance. This means removing trees spaced closer than 20 feet and vegetation from the flow area of the drainage way. At the request of the Phoenix Fire Department, a 10-foot firebreak from the walls will be provided.





## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **What about the Scenic Corridors?**

- A scenic corridor applies to a street that has or is intended to have a unique character. Maintenance of scenic corridors that preserve existing natural areas such as deserts, hills, or mountains should be handled with special care. A defensible space can be created within 30 feet of a building. For areas over 30 feet of a building, dead vegetation and non-native plants can be removed by hand or hand-raked. However, cacti, trees, or native shrubs should be maintained (some may appear dead but are dormant). Dead trees should be preserved as open space amenities and wildlife habitat corridors. Sonoran Desert wildlife is dependent on the habitat created by the natural environment. Dead trees, fallen saguaros, and low growth on trees provide cover for a variety of native wildlife<sup>1</sup>.

- **What about the officially designated “mitigation corridors”?**

- Several washes in the north Phoenix area have been designated as "mitigation corridors" due to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers requirements. Mitigation corridors are located within the Desert Ridge and Paradise Ridge areas. These mitigation corridors are preserved for environmental purposes, and most activities besides passive recreation are prohibited. Most of these mitigation corridors are marked by signs with the following language: "Please Walk Softly on the Land. The Wash Corridor Behind the Sign is a Perpetual Conservation Easement. Foot Traffic and Passive Recreation are Encouraged. No Vehicular Traffic, Dumping, or Wood Cutting is Allowed." Please check the mitigation corridor restrictive covenant to see if trimming, brush removal, and the creation of firebreaks within the defensible space are allowed only in emergencies or if they can be conducted at any time.
- The United States Bureau of Reclamation also has an area designated as a “mitigation corridor.” The Paradise Valley Flood Detention Basins, referred to as Reach 11, is located directly north of the Central Arizona Project (CAP) canal and runs between Cave Creek Road and Scottsdale Road. The Reach 11 area was created mainly to detain flood waters, but it also mitigates habitat loss due to the CAP system's construction. Although the Reach 11 area is preserved for hydrological and environmental purposes, passive recreation activities like hiking, biking, and horseback riding are allowed on designated trails. Please get in touch with the Central Arizona Water Conservation District if you have questions about establishing a defensible space between Reach 11 and private property.

<sup>1</sup>Phoenix Zoning Ordinance: Section 507 Tab A.II.A.1.1.2, 507 Tab A.I.I.A.2.2.8, and 507 Tab A.I.I.A.3.2.1

*NOTE: Mitigation corridor signs may not always be present. Please get in touch with your HOA to identify if the wash in Desert Ridge or Paradise Ridge near you is a mitigation corridor with a restrictive covenant. HOAs should have a copy of the restrictive covenant that can be referenced.*





## CONTACT INFORMATION

- **Fire Department**
  - The Fire Department fire inspectors respond to a broad range of requests for fire and life safety services, resident concerns regarding possible unsafe conditions or fire code violations and conduct fire inspections of new and existing buildings. For more information, please call 602-262-6771.
- **Neighborhood Services Department (NSD)**
  - The Neighborhood Services Department resolves issues about property maintenance and zoning on private property through education, partnership efforts, assistance, and code enforcement. For more information, please call 602-534-4444.
- **Planning and Development Department**
  - The Planning and Zoning Division should be contacted when questions about zoning stipulations arise. For more information, please call 602-262-7131, Option 6.
  - When specific questions arise regarding reviewing an approved site plan or subdivision documents, the Development Services Division should be contacted. For more information, please call 602-262-7800.
- **Parks and Recreation Department**
  - The Parks and Recreation Department should be contacted regarding what plant material constitutes non-native or procedures for vegetation removal. For more information, please call 602-262-6862.
- **Street Transportation Department**
  - The Street Transportation Department should be contacted regarding the maintenance of drainage ways and scenic corridors. Street Transportation will assist in determining who is responsible for maintaining a drainage way. For more information, please call 602-262-6441.
- **City of Phoenix Office of Environmental Programs**
  - The Office of Environmental Programs develops programs and policies to guide city activities and their interaction with our urban and natural environment. For more information, please call 602-256-5669.
- **Central Arizona Project**
  - Since the CAP, including the Reach 11 area, is a federal project, any land decisions related to requested land use or vegetation removal from the public or private sector must abide by specific directives that the United States Bureau of Reclamation mandates. Please get in touch with CAP's Lands Department at 623-869-2555 or by e-mail at [2555@cap-az.com](mailto:2555@cap-az.com) if you have any questions or want to discuss a proposed project or concern on CAP property.
- **Department of Forestry and Fire Management**
  - DFFM (State land) offers Firewise USA, a program to assist communities and HOAs in getting organized, finding direction, and taking action to reduce wildfire risks at the local level. For more information, please call 602-771-1400 and ask about the Firewise program. Please follow [this link](#) to learn more about Firewise USA.

