

Forest Fire Fuel Type H for Home.

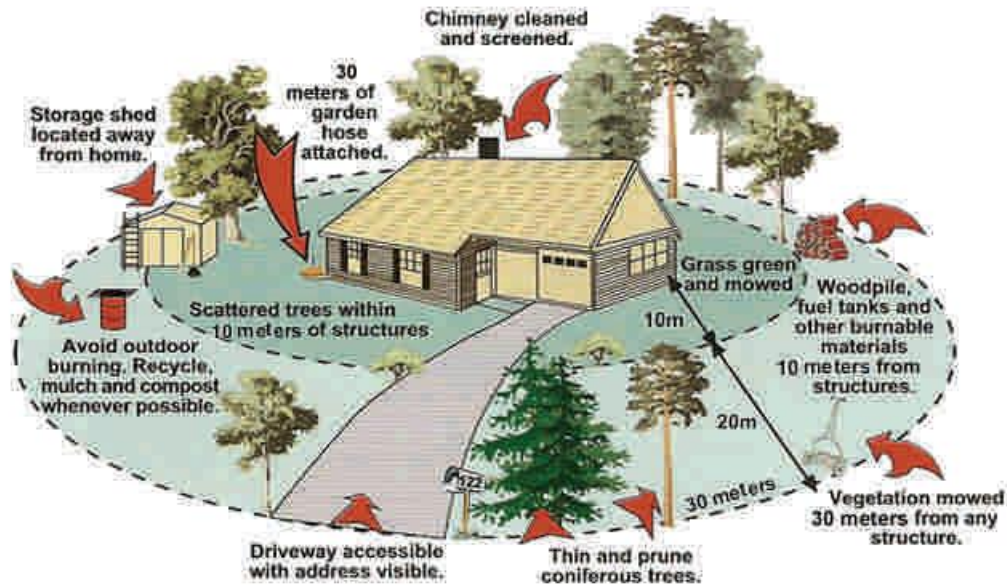
Portugal has been identified as one of the Southern European countries at highest risk from runaway damaging forest fires, with changing climatic conditions increasing the risk further. Nature is a powerful adversary, yet we love to live close to it, be surrounded by it and become complacent about how furiously the forests can burn, once alight. Wildfires are just that – a forest fire that is out of control, unmanaged, unplanned and unwanted. A home is just more fuel in the path of a wildfire. Wildland firefighters in the USA call it fuel type H.

Landscape fires are not all bad. In fact, Mediterranean ecosystems are fire adapted – born to burn - and need to burn from time to time to maintain biodiversity. The cork on a Cork Oak is there for a reason! Over eons, the tree has adapted to survive fire by hiding its buds under a thick, fire resistant, layer of cork, and it resprouts after a fire. Most indigenous Mediterranean plants have developed a fire survival strategy. Some carry seeds in cones that open and disperse after a fire, others have rootstocks that resprout from under the ground.

Unfortunately, some non-indigenous plants have the same strategies, but like to burn at higher temperatures! Australian Acacia and Eucalyptus are two offenders that have invaded Portugal, massively increasing fuel for landscape fires.

So what is the fire survival strategy for homes and the families that live in them? Research in the USA has proven that, when Firewise precautions have been taken, most structures have a fair chance of withstanding the force of a wildfire under moderate conditions. Australia, also prone to vicious wildfires, encourages homeowners to be prepared. Home owners living on the edge of wildlands in Portugal would be wise to follow suit.

Ideally, a fire should be able happen as a natural event without firefighters needing to place their lives on the line to protect a property, because the home is designed, positioned and maintained in such a way that the fire will go around it, and measures are in place to protect it against ignition from flying embers. This sounds far fetched, but it isn't! Weather severity and surrounding fuels do play a big role in the survivability of a home, but there much that can be done to reduce risk.



Make sure there is a clear area in the immediate vicinity of the structure.

10 metres is the very minimum. More is better. This doesn't mean bare ground, but that there is not fuel to feed the fire, allowing it to run along the ground or from bush to bush. Remove lower branches of trees so that creeping ground fire cannot reach the fuel above. Open up spaces so that tree crowns don't touch. Plant fleshy species such as Aloes and succulents in the zone closest to the structure. Well watered lawn is a good firebreak, as is gravel. Keep 'ladder fuels' – fences, creepers, woodpiles -away from the walls of the structure. Don't let branches overhang the roof. Before the fire season, clean up leaf litter and dry material that has accumulated under trees

Take a good look at your roof

According to the research done by USA specialist, Dr Jack Cohen, it's the "little things" that cause homes to ignite. Most homes that burn down ignite after the main fire has passed over, not from the radiant heat that they are exposed to during the main fire, provided that there is a reasonably clear zone in the immediate area around the structure. Flying embers that accumulate in the nooks and crannies are most often the culprits. The roof is the most exposed area. The remedies are often simple and inexpensive. Check for loose or lifting roof tiles and any place where windblown embers can accumulate. Box in eaves. Close any gaps between corrugated roofing and the roof structure. A non – flammable roofing material is always less risky.

Keep gutters clean of leaf litter. When the fire is approaching, block downpipes and fill gutters with water.

Apply fire retardant to thatch, and re-apply when necessary. A sprinkler system with an independent water supply also helps, but make sure you can depend on the water and electricity supply as these often go down during a wildfire.

Be prepared

Fit fine mesh to airvents.

Clean out dry vegetation from under decks and apply fire retardants to wooden decking.

Keep a special set of buckets, hosepipe, shovel, a fire beater, sacking, stout shoes, long sleeved cotton or woolen clothing, long pants and head covering all together in a fireproof place [inside the house!] in case of ember attack.

An independent water source such as a swimming pool or rainwater tank is invaluable. Electricity is often the first thing that goes down, so an electrically driven borehole can't be depended upon and municipal water pressure is needed by municipal firefighters, so there is often a drop in pressure.

Don't keep large quantities of flammable liquids on the property.

Make sure your driveway is clear and wide enough to take a fire tender.

Properties should have a number and address prominently displayed at the roadside so that emergency services can find you if you call for help. Reflective numbers are best under smoky conditions!

Buffer Zones

Push back and manage the vegetation at least 30 m from structures- more if the home is on a slope or there are very large dense trees, such as a plantation, on your boundary.

Keep lawns green and watered. In terraced villages, ensure that there is a 30 m buffer zone of managed landscape around the cluster of homes.

If you choose or are ordered to evacuate;

A well-built and well-prepared home is able to withstand far more than a human! Smoke and heat can become intolerable. If you are going to leave, leave as early as possible.

Have a checklist prepared and make sure the family knows what to do when fire approaches. Remember pets. Don't wait until the last minute – leave early – it is much safer. Take family pictures and memorabilia – people that have lost their homes say that this is what they most regret losing in a fire.

Close all windows. If drapes are heavy, close them, but if lightweight, open them as they may ignite from radiant heat.

Fill the bath and buckets before you go.

Leave lights on inside the house so that firefighters can see whether there is still power and can check inside for people.

Remove wooden garden furniture to a safe distance from the home, or put it inside.

Open all gates so that horses and other stock animals can get away and firefighters can get in.

If you have a ladder, leave it out on the ground well away from the building [Not against the house!] so that firefighters can gain quick access to the roof.

Return as soon as firefighters give the all clear.

Systematically work around the structure and check for smouldering embers and spot fires.

More information can be found at LANDWORKS.com

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