

DEBRIS BURNING SAFETY

Careless trash and debris burning ignites a tremendous number of wildfires every year in Texas, accounting for more than three-fourths of all wildfires in some regions of the state. Most people never intend to start a wildfire, but even the best of intentions can produce disastrous results when safety precautions aren't taken. Texans owe it to themselves and their neighbors to help prevent accidental wildfires from occurring.

Safe disposal of household trash, leaves, brush piles, and construction debris will eliminate a major wildfire threat. If you must burn debris, do it safely. Observe the fire safety tips outlined below. Get more information from your local fire department or the Texas Forest Service. Fire safety tips can also be found on the Internet. Two Texas websites offering fire safety information and links to other sites are: <http://texasforestservice.tamu.edu> and <http://www.tamu.edu/ticc>.

General Safety Tips For All Outdoor Fires

- **Check local laws and ordinances.** Some communities allow burning only during specified hours; others forbid it entirely. Counties may also restrict outdoor burning during periods of high or extreme fire danger.
- **Consider alternatives to burning.** Some types of debris, such as leaves, grass and stubble may be of more value if they are not burned. Composting can yield valuable organic matter that can be used to enrich the soil, while helping extend the useful life of landfills. Household trash such as glass and metal that can't be composted can be hauled away to a recycling center or landfill.
- **Don't burn outdoors during dry, windy weather when vegetation in the vicinity is dry and fire-prone.** It may only take a very small spark or burning ember to ignite dry vegetation. Winds may not only carry the burning material into surrounding vegetation but also fan the flames and spread the fire rapidly.
- **Before you burn trash or other debris outdoors, contact your local fire department to let them know of your plans.** You can find out if it is safe to burn outdoors and, in the event your fire should escape, firefighters will already have an idea of where the fire is located.
- **Stay with your fire.** Should your fire escape, you may be able to stop its spread before it becomes large enough to require additional personnel and equipment to contain it.

Burn Household Trash Safely

- **If you must burn household trash, don't pile it on the ground.** It will not burn completely and will be easily blown around, increasing the danger of spreading.
- **Burn trash in a covered receptacle in a cleared area well away from overhead branches and wires.** The metal grid or wire cover will help contain burning trash, and the cleared firebreak around the receptacle will further minimize the chances of a burning ember igniting a wildfire.
- **Avoid burning trash containing aerosol cans.** Heated cans will explode, and flying metal could cause an injury. The explosion may also scatter burning trash and cause a wildfire.
- **Avoid accumulating trash for several days in the burn receptacle and then igniting.** Compacted trash will burn longer and less completely, thereby generating more air pollution and requiring more watching.
- **Stay with your fire.** Untended trash fires are more likely to escape containment and become wildfires if you aren't present to take action.

Burn Leaves and Brush Piles Safely

- **Consider composting or mulching.** Leaves can be composted to produce organically rich soil amendments for gardens and flowerbeds. Branches and larger brush can be chipped and the resultant mulch used in flowerbeds to help hold moisture in the soil. Check for community recycling or chipping projects before opting to burn these materials.
- **Establish wide firebreaks around piles of leaves and brush to be burned.** Firebreaks should be free of vegetation and wide enough to contain burning embers that may fall or roll from the pile. The larger the pile to be burned, the wider the firebreak should be.
- **Keep debris piles small, gradually adding to the fires as they burn down.** Adding fuel gradually will keep fire intensity lower and lessen the chances that material will roll or be lofted over firebreaks into flammable vegetation. Large piles of burning debris generate intense heat capable of carrying relatively heavy burning embers up and away from the fire, perhaps far from the original fire.
- **Select burn locations away from overhanging branches and utility lines.** Intense heat rising from a fire could ignite leaves and branches of trees or damage overhead lines and disrupt essential utility services.
- **Keep water and equipment handy.** Have an available supply of water on hand to use in case your fire should get away. Mechanized equipment may be necessary to contain fires arising from brush pile burning, as embers may be blown farther from the fire and have more time to grow into an uncontrollable wildfire before you can get to the spot fire.
- **Stay informed about possible weather changes.** Gusty winds and changes in wind direction often accompany the passage of weather fronts. Thunderstorms may also generate strong gusts and downdrafts. Outdoor burning should be postponed when gusty winds are present or expected to occur during the time that burning would be in progress.

Burn Construction Debris Safely

- **Recycle as much waste building and packaging material as possible.** Local schools, day care facilities or community organizations might welcome materials to use for building blocks, toys and craft projects. Cardboard and many kinds of plastic can also be recycled.
- **Burn waste debris well away from vegetation and other construction materials.** Create a wide firebreak around debris to be burned. Avoid burning paper or cardboard in burn piles, as heat generated by the fire may lift burning scraps up and across fire lines, particularly if any wind is present.
- **Monitor your debris fire.** Keep watch on your debris fire to ensure prompt action should the fire escape containment. Burning only as much as can be consumed in one day will lessen the chances of escape. It may also help prevent air pollution, because air stagnation problems more often occur at night when wind speeds usually drop.