

# K-STATE

Research and Extension

Butler County

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# The Grapevine

## Houseplant Care

What a month January has been, with almost record heat early on and now colder weather and snowy temperatures. The bright side for me has been the houseplants I have indoors. Right now, I have several bouganvilleas blooming to provide a spot of color against the snow, and the green always reminds me that spring will come, even if it's -3 degrees outside.

January can be a time of transition for houseplants. By now, any systemic insecticide you may have applied has worn off, and insects may be showing up. As you water, inspect any plants that were outside or near open windows during the growing season. Remember to check the undersides of leaves and where they attach to the stems for spider mites, aphids, or mealybugs. This is also an excellent time to wash any dust that may be accumulating on your plants' leaves by sticking them in the shower and spraying them down. This shower can serve multiple purposes, from removing the dust to washing any excess salts out of the soil and even washing off any insects you might have found.

While it may be tempting to start fertilizing again, it's best to wait. Our houseplants are still in a somewhat dormant stage, even if they are under grow lights, and don't need the fertilizer yet. Wait until late February to start fertilizing at  $\frac{1}{4}$  the recommended rate. Once March arrives, you can resume fertilizing regularly as growth increases with longer daylight hours. Hopefully, your houseplants will thrive this winter. Happy Growing!



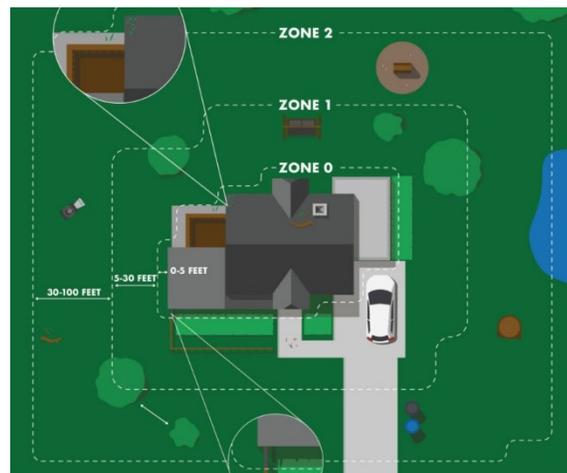
# Landscaping with Fire in Mind

Grassfire season is approaching, and with the fires that have happened around the state over the last few years, it's a season of concern for many. Up to 90% of home ignitions are caused by burning embers landing on vegetation and combustible materials near a home or by embers entering the house through openings, according to the International Journal of Wildland Fire. If you live in areas prone to grass fires or wildfires, it's essential to adopt landscaping practices that reduce the risk of your home burning. Some of these practices may seem counterintuitive to general landscaping principles, but if fire is a concern in your area, I highly recommend considering them.

As we consider landscaping around the home, we must create defensible space to reduce the risk of fire reaching your house. This area is a **buffer zone** that you make between your property and the surrounding wildland area. It is the key to stopping or slowing the spread of wildfires and also provides firefighters with a safe space to defend your property.

This area is divided into three zones. **Zone 0** is the first 5 feet around your home, focusing on aggressive fuel reduction to protect against embers. **Zone 1** is the area 5 to 30 feet from your home or the property boundary, and **Zone 2** is 30 to 100 feet beyond your home or to the property line boundary. These zones feature different vegetation management to reduce fire spread. In every zone, it is recommended to cut back all perennial plants and remove any dead plant material every fall. Always remove any leaves from your roof, yard, or gutters.

The **ember-resistant zone**, also known as zone zero, is the area closest to the house. During a wildfire, especially one with strong winds, embers can be blown ahead of the fire and create new fires where they land. In this area, it's essential to clear all combustible materials from the first five feet of your house. This includes plants, furniture, wooden patios, and organic mulches. In areas where fire is a concern, use gravel, pavers, or concrete instead of combustible mulch around the home. If you do have plants near the house, trim them back every fall before fire season. While this may contradict most landscaping principles and recommendations for beneficial insects, you can still create a beautiful and functional area around your home without using plants. If you must have plants near your home, consider using planters with low-growing plants or annuals that can be removed at the end of the season, as shown in the photo to the right. Succulents are also a suitable option for use near the home, as they are relatively resistant to ignition. Patios or hardscape areas can be incorporated near the house, featuring plants in zone 2, to enhance the home's beauty. Clear any overhanging tree limbs from the home at least 10 feet from the chimney to prevent embers from getting into the chimney.



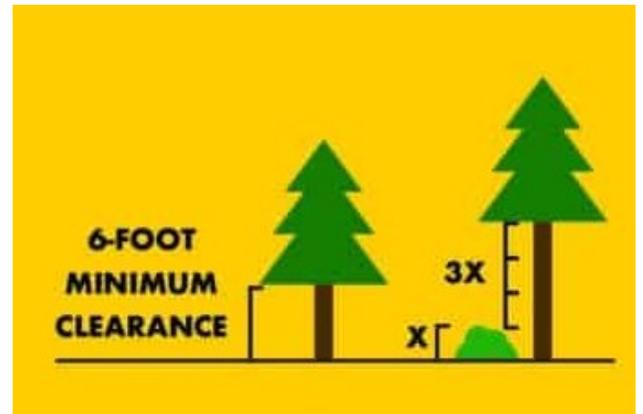
Zone 1 and Zone 2 extend from 5 to 100 feet from the home or to the edge of your property. In this area are your flowerbeds, lawn areas, and vegetable garden. In typical landscape design, we aim to avoid multiple small beds with breaks in the lawn between them; however, when considering fire safety, we plan slightly differently. As you plan your flower beds, consider planting them to interrupt the path fire can take to reach your house. Rather than planting one big flowerbed that leads to the house, create smaller island plantings surrounded by grass to reduce the pathway fire could take. It's also important to consider the spacing of plants



in those flowerbeds. Part of this is to space plants far enough apart to prevent the fire from spreading from one to the other. Leave a space around individual trees and shrubs that is at least two to three times their mature width. In areas with uphill slopes, you will need to increase this distance to four or even six times their width, as fire travels faster uphill and can spread further. Be sure to limb up trees, especially evergreens, to reduce the chances a fire can get into the tree and use it to create an ember storm. When planting trees and shrubs in flower beds, we also want to avoid making a “fire ladder.” A fire ladder is

created when an ember lands on a bush, ignites it, and the flames reach up to the tree's lowest branch, igniting it and allowing the fire to travel up the tree. A general rule of thumb is that fire can reach three times the height of the bush. For example, a 5-foot shrub near a tree needs 15 feet of clearance to the tree's lowest branch. The minimum height of tree branches from the ground, even if there are no plants around the tree, is six feet, including trees in shelter belts. It does reduce the effectiveness of the shelterbelt, but it reduces the risk of your trees catching fire.

Once you have considered the defensible zones, plant material, and mulch, use non-combustible materials such as gravel, rock, or pavers near the house. In zones 1 and 2, you can use wood mulch in your flowerbeds instead of rock. Of the wooden mulches, cedar and redwood are highly combustible and shouldn't be used in areas where fire is a concern. Some of the most flammable plants include juniper and pampas grasses. When selecting plant materials, opt for drought-resistant, native, open-structured, and pollinator-friendly options. It's important to note that the risk of plants burning can vary significantly depending on care and environmental conditions. Under extreme conditions, any plant will burn. When selecting plants, look for those that retain moisture, even during dry periods, and choose varieties that are lower in oils, waxes, and resins. Also, consider plants with an open growth structure that are slower-growing. Avoid plants with shedding bark, that produce a lot of dead plant material, and that have dense growth habits.



Here are some final tips to reduce your fire risk now without altering your landscaping. During dry, warm winter periods, be sure to water plants, especially evergreens, before a high fire risk period to reduce their chances of burning. Keep your plants trimmed and clean up any plant residue each fall. Remove any dead thatch or plant material from around plants regularly, as material can easily catch fire. Always clean out your gutters, including the downspouts, and remove any leaves that may have accumulated on your roof. It's also best to use metal fencing close to the house rather than a wooden privacy fence, which could catch fire.

While fire season is always a time of concern, there are steps you can take around your home and with your landscape to help reduce the chances that a grass fire will damage your home. For more information on fire landscaping, check out the [California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention's website](#) or [Marin Wildfire's Fire Smart Yards Guide](#).

## Starting Seeds at Home

Over the last few weeks, I have been sorting through my garden seeds to be ready for this year's gardening season. While we are still a few weeks away from starting most vegetable seeds, we can begin many of our annual flower seeds, along with some cole crops, right now. Here are some tips to help you get started this spring, including the basics of seed starting and how to troubleshoot some common issues you might encounter.

Timing is key to success when starting seeds for your garden. Most of our vegetable varieties will need to be started six to eight weeks, and flowers up to twelve weeks, before you plan to plant them outside in the garden. Most of our vegetables and flowers will need to be held inside till after the threat of frost is over; I usually recommend planting cole crops in mid-March, while cold-sensitive plants outdoors should wait till the end of April or the first part of May, since our average last frost is in mid-April. If we follow the recommended start times, we would start planting cool-season vegetables the first weekend of February; flowers, the first weekend of February; warm-season vegetable seeds, the first weekend to mid-March; and vining crops at the end of March or planted directly in the ground. Be sure to check the seed packaging before planting.

Once you have figured out when to start your seeds, providing enough light is the next big issue to address. Seedlings need at least 12 hours of light to prevent long leggy growth. Unfortunately, we can't get that amount of sunlight from a window alone so that some supplemental light will be necessary. Luckily, seedlings do not require high-quality, expensive light sources to grow successfully. I have found that using fluorescent light fixtures with one warm or daylight bulb and one cool bulb provides seedlings with the correct light spectrum for thriving. The bulbs need to be positioned four to six inches above the tops of the seedlings to provide enough light to prevent stretching. I usually use a timer to keep my lights on for 14 hours, making it easier to manage the light system.



Once you have the basics, such as when to start the seeds and have the lights ready to go, the next step is what to grow the seedlings in. Any container can be used, from garden trays to plastic cups to recycled plastic containers to paper pots, as long as it has good drainage so the plants don't drown. Make sure to use a high-quality seed-starting mix when planting your seeds. Don't use garden soil to start seeds, as it may contain weed seeds, diseases, or insects that could damage or kill your seedlings. Try a couple of different types of seed-starting media to see what works best for you. Once you have planted your seeds, use a plastic dome or bag to keep the seed mix from drying out while the seeds sprout. A heat mat under the seed mix can also speed up germination by keeping the soil warm. Using bottom heat can also help encourage uniform germination, so the seedlings are all about the same age for care and transplanting.

After the seedlings have started to germinate, it is time to remove the plastic dome or covering. While the seeds need moisture to germinate, too much moisture can lead to disease issues and seedling death. Keep the soil damp for the first few weeks after the seedlings emerge. It's easy to kill them by letting them get too dry since they have a tiny root system. Once the seedlings have 2-4 small leaves, it's time to transplant them into a larger pot or container and continue to let them grow until it's time to transplant them outside. During this time, continue to water them regularly and fertilize at half-strength to prevent deficiencies. Don't over-fertilize, as this can lead to long, leggy growth and weak transplants.

Starting seeds at home is one of my favorite wintertime activities. I love watching the plants grow from tiny seeds into fruitful plants that provide food for my family. Over the weekend, I plan to start my broccoli and some flower seeds, so I've been making sure my area is set up and ready to go. I'll talk more about how to transition seedlings outside in a future article as we get closer to that time. Happy growing!

## Upcoming Events

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### Garden Hour Webinars:

February 4<sup>th</sup>- Honey Bee Colony Management and Key Floral Resources

March 4<sup>th</sup>- Naturalistic Landscape Design Style

April 1<sup>st</sup>- April Showers, Rain Garden Flowers

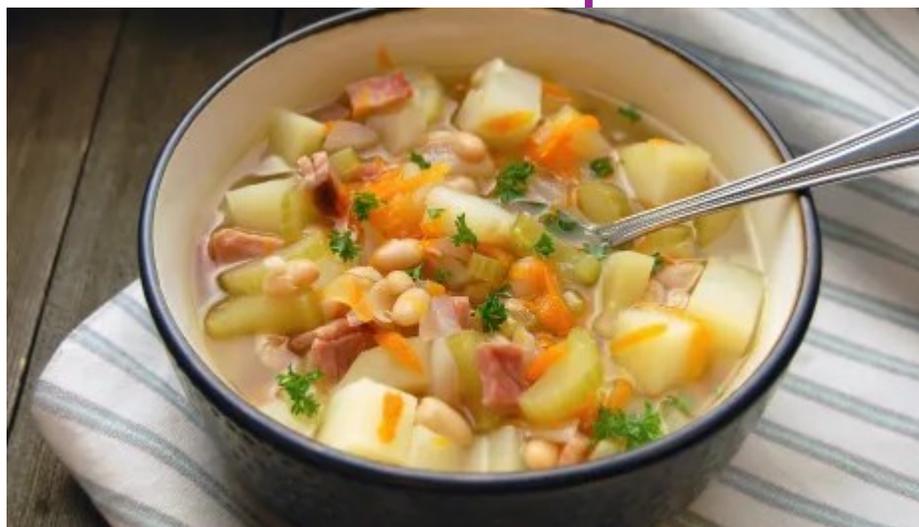
## Upcoming Events:

February 11<sup>th</sup> at 12:15 pm  
Myths and Misconceptions in the Garden at the Andover Public Library

February 16<sup>th</sup> at 12:15 pm  
Growing Cut Flowers at Lori's EmporiYum

March 28<sup>th</sup> at 9:30 am- Rain Barrel Clinic at the Whitewater Public Library

## Grandma B's Bean Soup



Warm up on those cold winter nights with this tasty bean and vegetable soup. Easy and inexpensive to make. Serves 8 people.

### Ingredients

- 3 carrots, peeled and shredded
- 2 medium potatoes, peeled and diced
- 3 stalks of celery, sliced
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 2 cups cubed, cooked ham
- 4 (15-ounce) cans navy beans (low sodium) – can substitute soaked, cooked dry beans
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- 12 cups water
- Salt and pepper to taste

### Directions

1. Place carrots, potatoes, celery, onion, and ham in a large pot.
2. Rinse and drain the beans. Add to pot.
3. Add water, garlic powder, onion powder, salt, and pepper.
4. Cook soup on medium to high heat until vegetables are soft, approximately three hours.

Source: [North Dakota State University Extension](#)



#KSTATEGARDENHOUR

# K-STATE GARDEN HOUR

## 2026 New Year Launch

First Wednesday of the Month

12:00 PM- 1:00 PM CST

January 7th- Soil Smarts: Best Practices to Improve Soil Health

February 4th- Honey Bee Colony Management & Key Floral Resources

March 4th- Naturalistic Landscape Design Style

The K-State Garden Hour is a free webinar series hosted by K-State Extension horticulture staff across the state. We hope you'll join us on the first Wednesday of each month as we discuss new and relevant gardening topics. The presentations will be given live from Noon to 1:00 pm CST with a 45-minute presentation and 10-15 minutes for questions and answers. Sessions will be recorded and posted to the website after each event. Your one-time registration will allow you to participate live in any of the featured presentations within the 2026 K-State Garden Hour series.



Register Here!

Please register for this free Zoom Webinar at:  
[ksre-learn.com/KStateGardenHour](https://ksre-learn.com/KStateGardenHour)

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