

Prescribed Burns: A Prescription for Healthy Plant Communities

Fear of forest fires has been implanted in us since the day the trusted, furry face of Smokey the Bear told us, “Only you can prevent forest fires.” We all believed him and feverently made it a point to eradicate all forest fires.

At that point in time our ignorance of the importance of forest fires proved to be extremely detrimental to the natural resources of our natural communities. Since then, we have a much better understanding of why our natural resources require fire and why we must burn. But there is often still a little Smokey voice rumbling in our subconscious which has not convinced many of us that forest fires are okay. Although Smokey the Bear has been very effective in teaching us that careless fire should be prevented, we need to understand that prescribed fire is a very valuable and necessary tool.

Back in the days of the Indians and early settlers, fire was a common occurrence. Generally the blazes were started by lightning strikes – the fire would burn for miles until it came upon a natural fire break such as a swamp, lake or hardwood hammock. At that time it would extinguish itself. Many times the Indians would start the fires; they were the first to actually practice controlled burning techniques.

Many plant communities are fire dependent. That means that without the presence of fire the community will be overtaken by other plant communities. The pine flat wood community in particular is a sunshine-loving area. When hardwood trees such as oaks, maples and hickories grow tall, they send out beautiful shady branches. This allows little sunlight to reach the pine seedlings. Eventually the pines will stop reproducing and die off and the hardwood trees will take over. This process is called succession.

When the flames rage through the pine forest, only the hardwood trees are killed. Most of the pine trees remain unharmed and actually benefit from the fire. It is in this way that the pine trees can once again reach up to the sun without the obstruction of the branches from the mighty oaks and other trees. The fire helps the pines to germinate causing reproduction and stopping the succession process.

Florida is the fastest growing state in the nation and as a result, the natural fire process has been stopped due to urbanization. This is where many natural resource based agencies enter the scene. Prescribed burning is an important part of today’s land management practices.

Burning is essential to the preservation and protection of our natural areas for many reasons. It stops the succession process, improves the resilience of pines, permits new growth such as wildflowers, revitalizes the soil with nutrients from the ash, and allows new species into the area. Prescription burns done on a regular basis also reduce fuel buildup – forest litter made up of pine needles, dead branches, leaves and vegetation, which can give rise to wildfires.

On July 10, 2007 teams from the Highlands County Parks and Recreation Department, Sun n’ Lakes Fire Department and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Lake Wales Ridge Fire Strike Team conducted a prescribed burn in the Sun ‘N Lakes Preserve. Approximately 100 acres were burned with the leadership of burn boss Steve Morrison from TNC. Conditions were excellent for the task and the goals of the burn were fuel reduction, biological benefits and to reduce fuel hazards (heavy fuel buildup) that may cause wildfire in the area. Summer burns such as this one benefit many of the plants that live in the pine flat wood community as well as the habitat for many of the animals that reside there, such as quail.

So next time you see a prescribed burn in process and smoke gets in your eyes- just remember it keeps the forest in its natural, healthy, green condition and protects you from those wildfires Smokey warned you about.

Some tips on landscaping that can reduce your chances of damage from wildfires:

(From the Florida Division of Forestry)

- Encircle the home with well-irrigated areas at least 30 feet on all sides, providing space for fire equipment in the event of an emergency. Plants should be limited to carefully spaced, fire-resistant tree and shrub species.
- Remove highly flammable vegetation around the home.
- Take out the “ladder fuels,” the vegetation that links grass and treetops. These fuels can carry fire from the vegetation to a structure or from a structure to vegetation.
- Keep trees and shrubs pruned. Prune all trees up to 6 – 10 feet from the ground.
- Mow the lawn regularly.
- Dispose of cuttings and debris promptly, according to local regulations.
- Keep a well maintained irrigation system.
- Landscape with less flammable plants such as dogwood, redbud, sycamore, magnolia, oaks, red maple, Florida soapberry, wild olive and black cherry. Check with local nurseries and landscaping stores for other recommendations.