

# Our firewise community— Protecting our homes from wildfires

By: Barbara Lemos



Wildfires are a fact of life in North Carolina. The proximity of ancestral forests and modern development results each year in millions of dollars in property damage and impact on humans and wildlife.

Whether started by natural or human causes, wildfires can spread quickly. The presence of longleaf pine trees, along with the volatile natural fuels of our Carolina bays, contributes to an elevated fire risk. Fanned by a 20 mile-per-hour wind, pine forest can burn at a rate of 340 acres per hour, versus 75 acres per hour for hardwood forest and an astonishing 3,000 acres per hour for coastal vegetation.

*We plan to conduct educational outreach at select community events and firewise literature is available at our Town Hall. St. James Design Guidelines (found at [www.stjamespoanc.org](http://www.stjamespoanc.org) under “Resources” then “Architectural Control Guidelines”) list fire-resistant landscape plants.*

We need to consider this risk when building, landscaping, maintaining and occupying our homes. We value the beauty and habitat value of our environment, and we value our homes, property and lifestyle. The challenge is balancing the risks inherent in our forest environment and the realities of modern living.

We can also mitigate risks on our properties by using appropriate building materials and in our selection and placement of trees, shrubs, grasses, impervious surfaces and mulch. We can control landscape irrigation, property access and location of ignition sources such as barbecue grills. We can remove yard

debris, clean roofs and gutters and trim deadwood. We can maintain “defensible space” around our homes to reduce potential fire damage.

To improve our risk-reduction efforts, the Town of St. James (TOSJ) became a “Firewise USA Community” in 2003. The National Fire Protection Association, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Department of the Interior and National Association of State Foresters, manages the Firewise program. We worked with local officials to assess risk, create mitigation plans and secure Firewise Community status.

We also recently expanded the number of members in our TOSJ Firewise Committee. Members work closely with the St. James Fire Department, the Developer, the POA, the TOSJ Emergency Management team and county and state officials to identify and address risks and maintain our Firewise certification.

You can find more information at [www.firewise.org/usa](http://www.firewise.org/usa) to help us live in harmony with our beautiful but challenging surroundings.



**Editor's Note:** Barbara Lemos is a member of the TOSJ Firewise Committee.