



KAMLOOPS

Xeriscaping and FireSmart landscaping
on private properties

By Sophie Guilbault

Source: City of Kamloops Facebook Page

THE SCIENCE

Several approaches can and should be used to reduce the risk of ignition at the property level during a wildfire. Several opportunities involve the building itself, including the importance of using fire-resistant roofing, siding materials and chimney spark arresters. It is equally critical to consider landscaping strategies around the house to eliminate any plants and trees that could act as fuel during a wildfire. Landscaping affects the risk of ignition, can introduce pathways to spread fire and may provide fuel to sustain the fire. Xeriscaping and FireSmart landscaping are two approaches that can be used to reduce ignition risk and the spread of fire around a property. These strategies promote the use of plants that do not require a great amount of water to grow and as such tend to do well in dry climates. In addition to using less water, a Xeriscape garden requires less maintenance, including less weeding, fertilizing, pruning and mowing. Further, as these plants have the ability to conserve water, it makes them fire resistant, which contributes to reduce fire risk around a property.

THE TRIGGER

Kamloops is a city of approximately 100,000 inhabitants located in south-central British Columbia. A few years ago, the City's Natural Resources crew started examining which landscaping approaches would be optimal for the community considering its very dry climate. They turned to Xeriscaping as a way to encourage the planting of species that require very little water to grow. As the crew was developing the Xeriscape program, they were approached by the fire department, which was keen to combine the Xeriscaping approach to a broader FireSmart landscaping strategy for the community and to promote both simultaneously. While some fire burnings were noted within the Kamloops Fire Centre jurisdiction this summer, the City of Kamloops has not been threatened directly by wildfires in recent years. Yet, it has been recognized by the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction and others for its thoughtful and innovative leadership by serving as a host city for evacuees during the devastating 2017 and 2018 wildfires that affected neighbouring communities.

THE APPROACH

The Natural Resources crew and Fire Department worked together to create a brochure that combined a list of xeriscape plants with broader FireSmart landscaping strategies. Beyond the recommended types of plants, the document also touches on optimal planting locations to create a fuel free area around the home. The brochure developed by the City also examines the types of mulch that should be used around plants and recommends the use of gravel mulch, rock mulch, or a combination of plant mulch and decorative rock mulch to reduce fire risk. The use of fire resilient mulch is important to reduce the risk that burning embers blown by the winds during a fire may bring fire into the community.

The Xeriscaping and FireSmart landscaping program is now shared between three departments in Kamloops (Natural Resources, Fire Rescue and Parks), who all share



Figure 17: *Xeriscaping and FireSmart landscaping are two approaches that can be used to reduce ignition risk and the spread of fire around a property. (Source: Adobe Stock Photo)*

the responsibility of the continuous development and marketing of the program. In order to promote this initiative, the Kamloops Fire department has built a demonstration house that combines Xeriscaping and FireSmart planting strategies so residents can see how this approach can lead to aesthetically pleasing results. City staff have also been attending various local events including home shows and farmers market to share information around the program with residents.

When asked if the City faced any challenges through the development and promotion of the program, Kirsten Wourms, Natural Resources Crew Leader for the City of Kamloops, mentioned that while the City considers wildfire risk reduction as an important priority, a lot of the actions that can be done to reduce fire risk have to take place at the private property level, which is where the City cannot do any work beyond promoting best practices. It is with this spirit in mind that the campaign “Do your part, be FireSmart” was created to increase the public’s sense of ownership when it comes to reducing the overall fire risk faced by the community. Beyond the landscaping program, the City has been offering FireSmart assessments of individual properties free of charge. They initially started by focusing on three high-risk areas where City staff went door to door to share information about various FireSmart strategies and how they should be applied in the wildland urban interface. Homeowners that wanted to go through the FireSmart assessment of their properties were also offered the possibility of having any flammable materials located around their homes shipped away at no cost.

THE OUTCOME

The City of Kamloops has only had the opportunity to conduct 50 FireSmart assessments at this point, which makes it challenging to evaluate the uptake rate of the Xeriscaping and FireSmart programs promoted by the City. Nevertheless, research consistently finds great potential and value in fire risk reduction through landscaping action and the municipality remains proactive in the promotion of wildfire risk reduction activities. This includes videos, radio advertisement and social media campaigns that will be released in the spring to further communicate the benefits of individual risk reduction actions at the property level. In addition, City staff continues to participate in community events hosted by groups such as community gardens and naturalist clubs.

A WORD FROM KAMLOOPS

When asked what advice she would offer to other communities interested in implementing similar programs as the ones in place in Kamloops, Ms. Wourms recommended to not reinvent the wheel. "There are some amazing programs and communities out there that have successfully implemented and promoted similar programs and there is a lot of information that is readily available," said Ms. Wourms. She also emphasized the importance of strong marketing campaigns, which are crucial to the implementation of successful programs. "There are communities that have very strong advertising campaigns and promoted their programs in successful ways. I would recommend reaching out to them and joining a united front. If someone comes up with a great way to get the information out to people, there are no reasons why it shouldn't be reproduced," added Ms. Wourms.