



HOME HARDENING

A Guide to Designing a Fire-Smart Perimeter

altadenafiresafe.org

Our Mission

The **Altadena Fire Safe Council** is working to reduce wildfire risk across our community through GIS-informed planning, science-based integrated vegetation management and regenerative land stewardship. We will pursue Firewise USA® neighborhood recognition by educating our community about home hardening, defensible space design, soil restoration and native plant landscaping.



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In fire-prone landscapes, the most important design move often begins not in the garden, but at the threshold of the home itself.



The five-foot zone surrounding a structure—sometimes called the ember-resistant or non-combustible zone—has become a cornerstone of wildfire-smart design. Yet this practical requirement need not read as austere or purely utilitarian. With thoughtful material choices and a strong architectural point of view, this critical band can become one of the most refined and intentional elements of the landscape.

Think of the first five feet as a tailored apron: a place where architecture meets earth, where materials matter, and where restraint becomes an aesthetic advantage. From Spanish Revival courtyards to midcentury terraces, the language of the home can guide the design—without sacrificing safety.

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Spanish Revival: Saltillo Warmth and Mexican Tile Accents

Spanish Revival homes invite romance, texture, and sun-washed color, and the ember-resistant zone is an ideal place to lean into those qualities. Hand-pressed Saltillo tile, with its soft terracotta tones and irregular edges, creates a walkway or patio surface that feels both historic and grounded. When properly installed on a concrete base, Saltillo offers a fully non-combustible surface that pairs beautifully with stucco walls and arched openings.

Mexican talavera or cement tiles can be introduced sparingly as decorative insets—lining a path, framing a threshold, or accenting a small landing. The key is scale and simplicity: broad expanses of warm tile, minimal grout lines, and no organic debris-trapping edges near the structure. The result is a fire-smart perimeter that feels like a natural extension of an Andalusian courtyard rather than a safety retrofit.



Stone & Rock Materials		
These are among the most fire-resistant landscape materials—non-combustible and great for patios, walkways, and decorative beds.		
Natural Stone	Flagstone	Irregular shapes, warm earthy tones
	Slate	Sleek, layered look
	Granite	Durable with a variety of colors
	Travertine	Light, upscale appearance (cool underfoot)
Loose Rock	Decorative rock/river rock	Multiple sizes and colors
	Crushed rock/decomposed granite (DG)	Tighter surface than gravel, good for walking paths
Boulders & Stone Accents	Large boulders	Create focal points or seating areas
	Fire performance: Non-combustible — will not ignite or contribute fuel.	



Midcentury Modern: Concrete Terrazzo and Large-Format Tile

Midcentury modern homes thrive on clarity, geometry, and material honesty—making them particularly well suited to a clean, non-combustible perimeter. Large-format concrete or terrazzo tiles create a crisp, continuous surface that visually extends the architecture outward, blurring the line between interior and exterior.

Terrazzo, whether poured in place or in tile form, offers subtle texture through aggregate while maintaining a smooth, ember-resistant finish. Neutral palettes—soft grays, warm bone, or pale sand—keep the focus on form and shadow. Joints are minimized, lines are intentional, and furnishings, if any, are metal or concrete. The five-foot zone becomes a quiet design gesture: elegant, spare, and inherently fire-wise.



Pavers & Masonry		
Excellent for walkways, patios, driveways, and borders. Hard, dense surfaces resist embers.		
Concrete Pavers	Standard concrete pavers	Durable, budget-friendly
	Stamped concrete pavers	Mimic stone or tile with pattern options
	Interlocking pavers	Flexible surface for ground movement
Brick & Clay Pavers	Dense and low-combustion	
Masonry Elements	Retaining walls	Planter and seat walls
	Fire performance: Non-combustible or Class A depending on installation and material.	



Craftsman: Flagstone and Crushed Stone

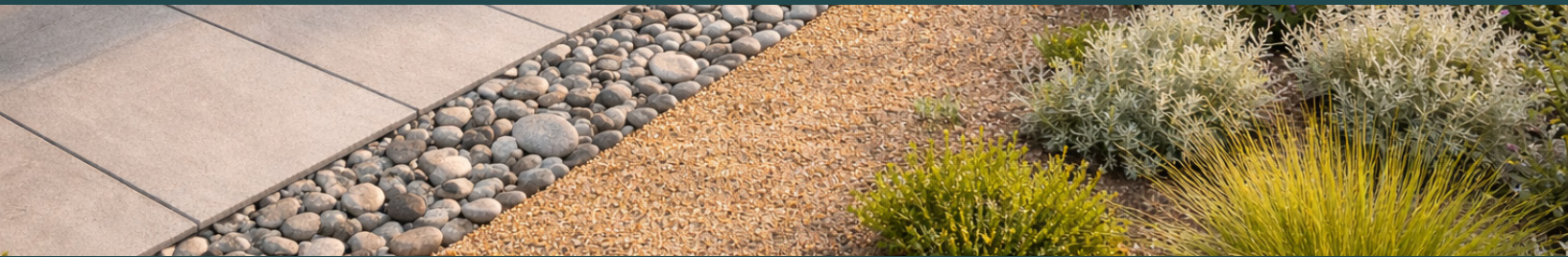
Craftsman homes ask for material depth and human scale. Here, the ember-resistant zone can echo traditional pathways and porches while meeting modern safety standards. Flagstone pavers offer durability and period-appropriate character.

Between pavers or in adjacent bands, crushed stone or small gravel provides excellent drainage and resists ember ignition. Choosing a stone color that complements the trim or masonry foundations helps the perimeter feel cohesive rather than imposed. The look is grounded and practical, with a tactile quality that feels true to the Craftsman ethos of honest materials and thoughtful workmanship.

Where Safety Meets Style

Designing the first five feet around a home is no longer just about compliance—it's about intention. By selecting non-combustible materials that reflect the architectural language of the house, this critical zone can enhance curb appeal, clarify circulation, and quietly perform its most important role: reducing ember ignition risk at the most vulnerable edge of the home.

In the end, the most successful ember-resistant landscapes are the ones you hardly notice as “fire-safe” at all. They simply feel right—grounded, thoughtful, and beautifully at home.



Hidden Benefits You Don't See—Until There's a Problem

The five-foot ember-resistant zone does more than reduce wildfire risk. Keeping plants and organic materials away from a home's foundation protects the structure in quieter, but equally important, ways—often saving homeowners from costly repairs down the line.

Moisture & Water Damage

Plants and mulch hold moisture against walls and foundations. Over time, this can lead to staining, rot, efflorescence, and interior humidity issues. Hardscape and gravel allow surfaces to dry naturally.

Termites & Pest Prevention

Dense planting beds create cool, damp shelter for termites and ants. Vegetation touching the house can act as a hidden bridge for pests to bypass inspections and enter the structure.

Foundation Protection

Roots from shrubs and groundcovers can exploit small cracks in concrete or masonry, widening them over time. Keeping the foundation clear eliminates root pressure where it matters most.

Improved Drainage

Organic beds often slow water movement, allowing it to pool near foundations. Non-combustible materials encourage water to move away from the structure, reducing soil saturation and pressure.

Easier Maintenance & Inspections

A clear perimeter makes it easier to spot cracks, insect tubes, rusting vents, or failing seals—allowing small problems to be addressed early.