

Year Round Gardening

Fifth Anniversary of the Black Forest Fire

Kitty West, Colorado Master Gardener

June 11th marks the 5th anniversary of the Black Forest Fire, an inferno that burned 14,280 acres, destroyed 488 homes and killed 2 El Paso County residents. The fire was devastating for many; some are still in recovery mode. Our landscape was significantly damaged. Fortunately, the house was not destroyed and this was due in large part to routine mitigation, the work of the firefighters and luck.

At the time of the fire, I had no idea how damage to the landscape would change the environment and my efforts as a gardener. I like the “new” landscape. But, landscape maintenance is now significantly more labor-intensive.

Days after the fire – Courtesy of Kitty West

We lost about 60% of our trees. We now have a partially treed property and areas of native grasses. Some of the grasses regenerated naturally, but lot of effort was expended seeding large areas of the property. We used a specially formulated seed blend for the Black Forest area. Seeding grasses on the burned sections of the property helped to ensure there would be only minimal invasion by the noxious weeds. When I do



find the noxious weeds - Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), Diffuse knapweed (*Centaurea diffusa*), Common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) - they are dug out. This is a year-round process. The grasses have been effective in controlling erosion and the loss of top soil during windy periods. Fewer trees mean more light on the property. We now have many more native wildflowers growing among the grasses – Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Pineywoods geranium (*Geranium caespitosum*) and Southwestern cosmos (*Cosmos parviflorus*).

The rains immediately following the fire resulted in new drainage areas across the property. These areas are now being filled in by native shrubs – Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), Wild rose (*Rosa woodsii*), Scrub oak (*Quercus gambelii*) and Mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus montanus*). In the very early spring I cut these shrubs to

remove the branches broken by the deer. The native wildflower Common evening primrose (*Oenothera villosa*) grows well in the drainage areas. Over the winter months the numerous woody stocks that remain are pulled out. They are unattractive and will not decompose within a reasonable period of time.

Prior to the fire, the Black Forest was a very quiet area. Now, the lack of trees means more traffic/construction noise and wind. The winds bring unwanted plant material across the property. This past winter I collected more than ten 30-gallon trash bags of tumbleweeds. I anticipate the upcoming summer months will be spent pulling the Russian thistles (*Salsola tragus* L.) that will germinate from the seeds the tumbleweeds deposited on the property.

One year later

I am very grateful that our home did not burn, and we now have a diverse and more interesting landscape. The maintenance work ensures I will get plenty of exercise and fresh air. Unfortunately, many property owners are still working to recover. Shortly after the fire, a non-profit group (501(c)3) was established to assist with the recovery – [Black Forest Together](#). This group is now a national contest finalist for a piece of John Deere heavy equipment (a skid steer with attachments that will assist in both removing burned trees and transplanting trees for reforestation and wildlife habitat restoration). The contest will be hosted on www.johndeere.com. Contest participants will be allowed to vote on-line once, daily, via their email address from 4-18 June. The winner of the contest is based on the number of on-line votes received. You can assist by voting in the contest. Winning the contest will significantly help in the continuing recovery efforts in the Black Forest.



Lastly, I invite all to take a drive through the Black Forest so you can see for yourselves how well the recovery is progressing. Black Forest is truly a unique and lovely part of El Paso County.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research based answers. The help desk is located at 17 N. Spruce Street. Hours are Monday to Thursday from 9 am – 12 pm, phone 520-7684 or email CSUm2@elpasoco.com. Get answers to your horticulture questions any time day or night at ask.extension.org. For current garden tips visit www.facebook.com/ColoradoMasterGardeners.EPC