

Wildfires and Prescribed Burns: Part 2

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[Part 1](#) of this series looked at prescribed burns and how they differ from wildfires. As all wildfires are unique to their conditions and terrain, this article is a case study of Royal Lake Park's April 2007 forest fire. It started when teenagers at their parkland hangout set an illegal campfire that got out of control and burned two acres of a forested hill. Firefighters extinguished the blaze before it reached a townhouse community. Prior to the fire, these long-established woodlands were healthy with large, slow-growing mountain laurels (*Kalmia latifolia*) and mixed oaks that were over 100 years old. No invasive plants were present. The fire's immediate aftermath saw burnt logs and felled trees (some had cuts made by firefighters), charred bark on the still standing trunks, and mountain laurels killed above ground level. According to FCPA, these youths never learned their lesson—they kept cutting small trees, making campfires, partaking in substance abuse, and littering until June 2008. This photo-essay shows the wildfire's aftermath.

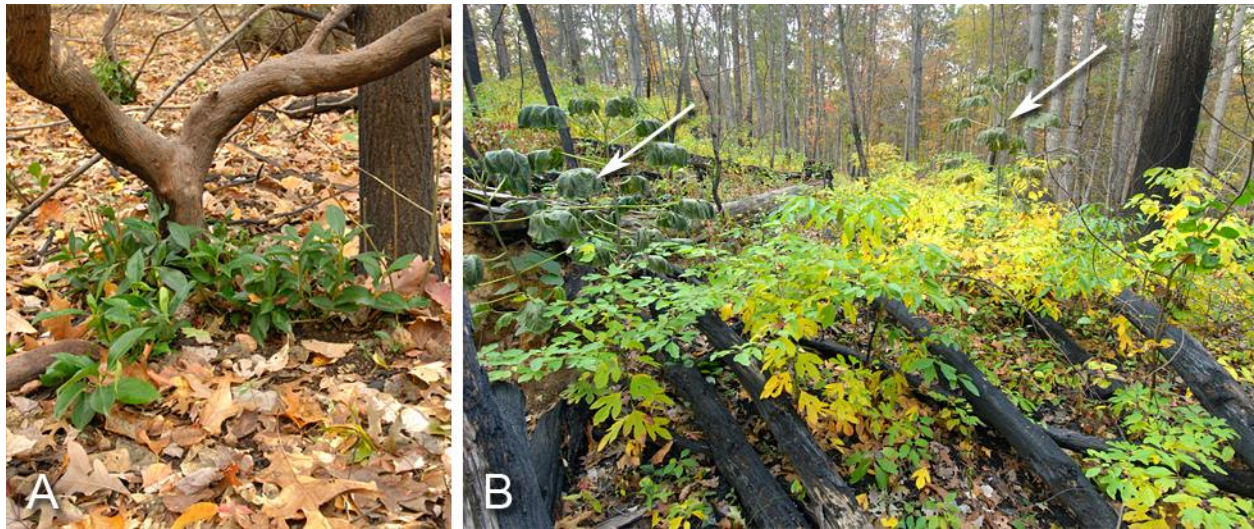


Figure 3. November 2007. In the months that followed, the forest began regenerating. Through the scorched land, greenery soon emerged, such as new shoots at the mountain laurel's base (A). Fresh leaf litter covered the still charred earth. Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), a small native tree already present, arose around the blackened logs (B). Seen here with yellowing autumn foliage, sassafras grows through extensive root suckers. This plot was a mature forest, so finding [early succession](#) native plants (i.e., species found in fields where the earth was recently churned), such as pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*), were indicative of a soil disturbance. Furthermore, some invasive plants also appeared, especially princess trees (*Paulownia tomentosa*), seen here (arrows) with leaves wilted by frost. Most of the mature oaks produced leaves that year, offering hope that they survived.



Figure 4. April 2008. Many old-growth oaks are now large, burnt logs. Instead of oak seedlings germinating, the new greenery is from early succession tulip poplars, red maples, and pokeweed.

Wildfire Prevention

Exact wildfire prevention measures and the sorts of fire-related activities allowed vary from region to region. Always follow local ordinances and laws. Fairfax County's Recreational Fires Guidelines are available at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/fire-ems/fire-marshal/recreational-fires-guidelines>. Good suburban fire practices include:

- Contain outdoor fires in barbeque grills, chimeneas, or outdoor fireplaces
 - Information on bonfires is at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/fire-ems/fire-marshal/bonfire-guidelines>
- Never leave fires unattended
- Be ready to quell flames with water or extinguishers
- Completely extinguish fires so that they are cold before leaving
- Put cigarette butts and used matches in water or an enclosed, burn-proof container until cold before disposing of them with regular trash
- Never start fires, including barbeques and fireworks, on windy days within 300 feet of dry grass or woodlands
 - Remember that airborne embers can start wildfires when they land on combustibles
 - Be aware of and heed red flag warnings on dry, windy days when fires can quickly spread
- Ignite only fireworks that are legal for that locality and under safe weather conditions
 - Watch over children lighting fireworks or using matches and lighters
 - Light fireworks on pavement or freshly watered lawns and away from anything that can be ignited by a spark
- Place oily rags, fresh wood dust from power sanders (e.g., hardwood floor resurfacing), and other items that can spontaneously combust in sealed, fire-proof containers
- Keep vehicles off of dry grass

[Part 3](#) continues examining this forest fire case study and has links for further reading.

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