

Dispelling common myths about grass burning

To many people, burning grass is a tradition, almost a rite of spring. On closer examination, however, the reasons for spring grass burning are largely unfounded and rather than being beneficial, grass burning is destructive and dangerous.



Myth: It is safe to burn grass as long as there is still some snow on the ground.

Fact: Within hours of snow melting, dead grass becomes flammable, especially if there have been drying winds. Grass fires burn hot and fast and spread quickly around, and even over, patches of snow.

Myth: Spring grass burning controls weeds.

Fact: The weeds deposited their seeds into the surrounding soil last fall. Burning creates an ideal bare soil bed for the seeds to germinate.

Myth: Spring burning improves the new grass crop.

Fact: Burning actually reduces grass yield 50 to 70 per cent.

Myth: Burning makes the new grass come in greener.

Fact: The new grass will be the same colour whether burning took place or not. It just appears greener due to the contrast against the bare, blackened ground.

Myth: I do not see much wildlife around here, so I can burn grass without threatening any animals.

Fact: Burning destroys the habitat of species you do not normally see, such as mice and moles, as well as the nests and eggs of certain birds. If the fire gets out of control, larger animals can be caught by the flames and many species will lose habitat.

Myth: Lost habitat will grow back in a few months and wildlife will return.

Fact: It may take several years to replace what was lost. Vegetation is often multilayered with higher growth protecting undergrowth. Different species depend on different layers for food or shelter. Loss of the lower layer and its residents will impact species that prey on those lost species.

Myth: Spring burning is the easiest way to get rid of last year's vegetation.

Fact: Easy perhaps, but not good for the soil. Burning results in most of the old plants' nutrients going up in smoke or remaining in ash that is washed away. Burning also releases CO₂ into the atmosphere. Ploughing old plants under, or allowing them to decompose, allows carbon and fertilizing elements to go back into the soil.

Myth: It is pretty safe to burn grass here. There is a fire hall just down the road.

Fact: Under the *Forests Fires Act*, if you light a fire, you are responsible for it. If your fire gets out of control, you may be liable for the cost of fighting it and the destruction of others' property. You may also face criminal penalties for violating burning regulations.

Special thanks to Nova Scotia Natural Resources for permission to use its documentation.

*For more information about burning, visit
www.gnb.ca/firewatch*