



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security
Department of Fire Services



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STEPHEN D. COAN
STATE FIRE MARSHAL

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Keep Smoking Material Out of Bark Mulch

“Improper disposal of smoking materials in bark mulch, used to landscape around buildings, causes many fires at this time of year,” said State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan. “Don’t throw cigarettes butts into mulch; it creates the perfect fire triangle – heat, fuel and air,” he added. Mulch is decaying natural material that is easily ignited. Especially when fresh, it provides the right atmosphere to harbor a lit or not fully extinguished cigarette.

Million Dollar Mulch Fires

In the past five years, there have been 184 fires that started in mulch but spread to buildings. The most notable event occurred at a Peabody apartment complex in May 2008. A cigarette-lit mulch fire caused a \$5 million loss, displaced 750 people temporarily and 36 the residents of the apartments permanently.

Containers for Safe Disposal of Smoking Materials

“Businesses that are sprucing up their landscaping should also be careful and provide and maintain a safe receptacle for disposing of smoking materials so that patrons won’t start fires by flicking cigarettes into the mulch,” said Coan.

Coan said, “Since many smokers have moved outdoors instead of smoking inside for health reasons, we have seen an increase in porch and deck fires from improperly disposed of smoking materials. It is important to have an appropriate container to safely dispose of cigarette butts and ashes and a dried-out potted plant is not one.”

In Abington in April 2009, a guest was smoking on the back porch and ignited the mulch bed. The fire caused over half of million dollars in damages to the home and injured one firefighter. In Everett, this past March, smoking materials improperly disposed of outside a 2-family home ignited a fire in leaves and brush and the fire took the lives of the two elderly second floor residents.

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“Smoking materials cause a lot of outdoor fires at this time of year,” said Coan. “Whether it is last year’s dried out mulch, this year’s new mulch, or last year’s dried leaves and grass in the backyard or along the roadside, an improperly disposed of cigarette can start a fire quickly at this time of year,” he added.

National Smoking Campaign: *Put It Out, All the Way, Every Time*

The U.S. Fire Administration has a new campaign on preventing smoking fires that encourages smokers to *Put It Out. All the Way. Every Time.* Log onto <http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/campaigns/smoking/> for more information.

Dispose of cigarettes inside your motor vehicle; do not throw them out the window. Because of the risk of starting a fire, it is illegal to do so and punishable by a fine of \$100 and/or thirty days imprisonment.

Massachusetts Fires Caused by Smoking Materials

In Massachusetts during 2008, 1,558 fires were caused by smoking including: 489 structure fires, 43 motor vehicle fires, 794 tree, brush or grass fires, 81 trash or rubbish fires, 90 special outside fires, and 10 cultivated vegetation or crop fires. These fires caused 11 civilian deaths, 31 civilian injuries, 45 firefighter injuries and an estimated \$29.6 in property damage.

For more information on fire safety, look on the Department of Fire Services website at www.mass.gov/dfs under *Fire Safety Topics*.

About the Department of Fire Services

The mission of the Department of Fire Services is to promote and enhance firefighter safety through policy and training, to assist and support the fire service community in protecting the lives and property of the citizens of Massachusetts, and to provide a presence in the Executive Office of Public Safety in order to direct policy and legislation on all fire related matters.