

# HOUSTON ARBORETUM & NATURE CENTER

**For Immediate Release:**

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## **Houston Arboretum to conduct prescribed fire in the woodland area of the nature sanctuary, weather permitting**

*Prescribed fire is an important wildland management tool*

**HOUSTON, March 17, 2026** – In partnership with the Houston Fire Department (HFD), Houston Arboretum & Nature Center will conduct a prescribed fire in approximately twenty acres of woodland habitat, located in the southeastern portion of the nature sanctuary. The fire will take place on Wednesday, March 18, weather permitting. This area is located just south of the Arboretum’s Meadow Pond.

The Houston Arboretum regularly uses prescribed fire as a science-based land management practice. The most recent prescribed fire, conducted in February 2024, focused on the Savanna habitat. This upcoming prescribed fire will be the fifth one at the Arboretum since March 2021. The Arboretum executed its first successful prescribed fire in the late 1990s and continues to recognize fire as an essential tool for maintaining healthy ecosystems.

The Houston Arboretum works closely with the Houston Fire Department – Wildlands Burn Unit to safely plan and conduct prescribed fires. HFD is the primary partner and lead collaborator on this project, working alongside the Arboretum’s conservation staff. All participating personnel have undergone extensive training, meet national wildland firefighting and incident management standards, and will oversee public safety throughout the operation.

“Historically, the Houston region burned every one to three years from natural occurrences,” said Stephen Benigno, Conservation Director for the Houston Arboretum. “Our landscapes are reliant on fire, and we are seeing the positive impacts of prescribed fires, including increased diversity of native vegetation and reduced invasive species, in areas where fire has previously been applied.”

Prescribed fires are carefully planned to safely mimic natural fire cycles and are widely used to enhance the resiliency and diversity of native habitats. Periodic burns also reduce the risk of destructive wildfires by decreasing the fuel load—such as dead trees, leaf litter, and other flammable vegetation—in designated areas.

“Another significant benefit of prescribed fire is the opportunity to educate the public about fire as a land management and wildfire prevention tool,” Benigno added. “The Arboretum is centrally located in the fourth-largest city in the country and successfully executing a prescribed fire here provides a powerful learning opportunity.”

Ecologically, use of prescribed fire in a woodland habitat clears dry leaf litter and dead brush in the understory, returning nutrients to the soil, reanimating dormant seeds in the seedbank, and reducing competition for young trees. The reduction of an unnaturally dense understory should also allow the Arboretum's mature trees to take in more water during periods of drought, increasing their resilience in the face of future climate stress. This type of land management has been shown to improve native biodiversity, and it is a relatively inexpensive method that can accomplish the same impact as many months of work clearing the area by hand.

Weather conditions, including wind speed and direction, will be closely monitored to ensure a successful fire and quick dispersion of associated smoke. If conditions are deemed unsuitable, the fire will be postponed. The impacted area will be closed to visitors for the duration of the fire.

"The Houston Fire Department's Wildland Division has extensive training in controlled burn techniques and has carefully evaluated weather conditions to ensure these fires can be conducted safely. The safety of our personnel and the public is our top priority. We ask the public not to call 911 if they see smoke or fire personnel in these areas. This is a planned operation designed to reduce wildfire risk and protect our community." HFD Fire Chief Thomas Muñoz

The prescribed fire plan, developed jointly by HFD, Texas Parks & Wildlife, Houston Parks & Recreation Department, and the Houston Arboretum, outlines specific weather and environmental conditions required for a safe operation, as well as contingency measures to protect nearby properties. Arboretum staff and volunteers have created fire breaks around structures and trails within the burn unit to safely contain the fire within its intended area. During the prescribed fire, residents may see smoke in the surrounding area or on nearby roadways and are urged not to call 911. Fire personnel will be stationed near the burn site.

HFD advises drivers in the area to reduce speed, use headlights when smoke is present, and follow posted reduced speed limits.

After the prescribed fire, Arboretum visitors who walk near the burn unit may still see or smell small amounts of smoke for up to five days afterwards as fallen logs smolder. All smoldering areas will be closely monitored and will be extinguished if they pose any threat to the surrounding area. Guests can expect to see charred and blackened ground in portions of the burn unit; however, plant material is expected to grow quickly as spring approaches, and after a couple of months, the only indication will be subtle charring around the base of some of the trees.

The Houston Arboretum will issue a media update if there are any changes to the prescribed fire date.

For more information and updates about the Arboretum's prescribed fire, go to <https://houstonarboretum.org/conservation/ecological-restoration-and-land-stewardship/prescribed-fire/>

For information on Wildland Fire Management and prescribed fire, please visit [https://tpwd.texas.gov/landwater/land/wildland\\_fire\\_management/](https://tpwd.texas.gov/landwater/land/wildland_fire_management/).

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**ABOUT:**

The mission of the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center is to provide education about the natural environment to people of all ages and to protect and enhance the Arboretum as a haven and as a sanctuary for native plants and

animals. The Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, one of the first nature education facilities for children in the state of Texas serves more than 600,000 visitors annually. The Arboretum also provides nature education for more than 10,000 children annually. For more information about the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center and levels of membership visit [houstonarboretum.org](http://houstonarboretum.org).