

Fire Wise Landscaping – A Fresh Look Is Good

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If you are like many residents of the West Slope, you may have lost long-established plants to the prolonged freezing weather of January. At my Camino home, 3000 foot in elevation, plants that have made it through many past winters are looking mighty unhappy right now. Luckily for me, we are overdue for a major landscape renovation this year, and the job will be easier now that Mother Nature has made some the removal decisions for me. Whether you have a landscape in need of renewal, or one that seemed perfect, it may be time to look at your landscape from a new perspective: one that incorporates fire-wise practices.

There are lots of reasons for assessing your landscape for fire safety:

- Location, Location, Location - Almost all of us on the West Slope live adjacent to wildland areas. Whether oak woodlands, conifer forests, or open grass land, our homes are part of ecosystems that have traditionally burned. But houses in previously undeveloped areas have changed the fire equation.
- Climate - Even though last summer was cooler than average, our long dry hot summer months make us vulnerable to natural and human-caused fires. We can't change the climate, but we must do what we can to mitigate it.
- State Law - Since 2006, California state law has mandated 100' of defensible space around all structures. If your landscaping predates this change, you may be out of compliance.
- Insurance - Since my husband and I started teaching Master Gardener classes on fire-safe landscaping 10 years ago, the homeowners' insurance issue has really come to the forefront. The rising cost of insurance in wildland-urban interface areas has created an additional incentive for residents to take action, both individually and as neighborhoods.

What do experts recommend? According to Firewise.org, a project of the National Fire Protection Association, it is important to take a look at your house and think of everything on and around your house, what they refer to as the "home ignition zone," as fuel. From the construction materials of your house, roof and decking, to the landscape plants adjacent to and surrounding your home, the plants are probably the easiest thing to control. The most important space might be the 5 foot area encircling your home. If you do decide to plant within this area, your plants should be low growing and irrigated, without woody undergrowth or trunks. Keep mulch close to the house at a minimum, since it can be a source of ignition. As you move out into the 30 foot zone, keep in mind the importance of spacing, both horizontal and vertical. A goal in this area, and extending into the entire 100 foot defensible space zone, is to



Graphic courtesy of San Bernardino County Mountain Area Safety Task Force

eliminate ladder fuels which allow fire to move up through woody vegetation into tree tops.

In general, trees should be limbed up 10 feet from the ground and be spaced so that the tops or crowns are 10 feet apart. Shrubs and large perennials should be clumped, rather than planted in a continuous block. Often the same spacing that provides increased fire resistance also promotes better plant health, because plants are competing less for sunshine and water.

There is much valuable information available online, whether from CAL Fire, our El Dorado Fire Safe Council, or the University of California Master Gardener website. (Click on the “Internet Resources” and “Fire Safety” buttons.) In addition, the Master Gardener Outreach Program can provide speakers on this topic for your home-owners’ group or neighborhood association. So educate yourself, and then take a look at your landscape through a new filter, one that will promote a safer and more healthy landscape.

Join Master Gardeners and Master Food Preservers on Saturday, March 2nd for Tomatoes class. The first half of class addresses tomato varieties, pests, diseases, proper watering and care. The second half of class shows what to do with your tomato harvest: canning, dehydrating, and freezing. There is no charge for this three-hour event, starting at 9:00 a.m. in the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Ct in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.