



The Resilient Garden - Being Prepared for What Mother Nature Brings
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What do wildfires, droughts, and floods all have in common? During the final days of February, all three were the topic of local newscasts. While they might seem a surprising combination, this year California has been, and may continue to be, at risk from all three. Year-round wildfires have occurred because drought has brought dangerously dry conditions. And now, strong late winter rains are resulting in mud-slides in burned areas in Southern California.

So what's a gardener to do to prepare for such diverse challenges? That is the question that resulted in the book, The Weather-Resilient Garden, by Charles W.G. Smith, written 10 years ago. His premise is that every landscape and every garden will face weather challenges. His goal is to give homeowners and gardeners the necessary tools to cope with whatever challenges may come their way.

With chapters about ice and snow, wind, lightening and humidity, Smith's book is a wonderful resource for people throughout the world. But his chapters on the major challenges facing El Dorado County - drought and wildfires - are particularly pertinent. That's why the *Fire Wise Landscaping* class that Master Gardeners have scheduled for March 15, 2014 will be broadened this year to include tips for developing a garden that can be resilient in the face of fire and drought.

Whether you have a well or water from EID or a similar agency, chances are that water cutbacks will leave you facing some decisions about your landscaping and irrigation this year. At the same time, it's a good opportunity to assess what you can do to minimize fire risk, and incorporate any needed changes into your property.

In general, fire-wise landscaping basics include two zones and you might be surprised at the overlap with suggestions for drought resistance:

Clean/Green Zone – Your house and a 30’ perimeter are generally the most maintained and irrigated areas of your property because it is most visible to you. Chances are your favorite plants are in this zone and you will do what you can to keep them attractive. For most people, this area includes lawn, groundcover, shrubs, and annual and perennial flowers. This year’s conditions might mean that you add water saving drip irrigation, switch to more efficient modern sprinkler heads for lawns, eliminate some lawn, and/or add mulch. Good mulches for this area are wood chips or compost, rather than leaves or straw whose light fibers might easily ignite in a fire.

Reduced Fuel Zone (30-100’) - Plants in this zone can often live with less water. This outer zone can be a place where drought tolerant plants provide color and interest without major use of water. This is also a good place for hardscape features, such as walkways or non-flammable retaining walls, which take no water and can serve as fuel breaks. On larger parcels, this area and beyond may have little that was actually planted and instead consist mostly of shrubs and trees that are native to the property. With recent rains, these native areas should have received adequate winter rains to make it through the dry season. So the major focus here is on maintenance: limbing up dead branches, cutting back dead undergrowth and increasing horizontal and vertical space between plants. This is done to prevent ladder fuels, the continuous stretch of plants that allows fire to spread and jump up into trees. This increased spacing will also allow remaining vegetation to have less competition for water.

Now that our plants have finally gotten a good soaking in February, home owners should closely monitor soil moisture and plant appearance. Spring is an important time to help your plants adapt to a new watering regimen – one that will minimize water use, while still keeping them growing well and able to withstand fire. Hold off watering your plants in spring until you are sure they need it, and then water deeply and infrequently. The cool nights of spring give you a bit of wiggle room as you experiment with watering your plants differently than in the past. For most perennials, don’t water until the top couple inches of soil are dry. This will encourage your plants to establish deep roots.

It’s a good time to research water needs of your specific plants. We’ve all seen abandoned houses where roses or camellias have survived with total neglect. If you do your homework, you might be surprised how many plants show up on both drought-tolerant and fire-resistant plant lists. One helpful publication that shows both drought and fire resilient plants is from Oregon State Extension and can be found at http://www.firefree.org/images/uploads/FIR_FireResPlants_07.pdf.

This might also be the year that you minimize fertilization of plants or use time-release fertilizer. New growth often requires the most water, and keeping your plants healthy but not lush may be better for them and your landscape in the long run for this year.

Want to learn more? Come to the free Master Gardener class this Saturday, “Fire Wise Landscaping and the Resilient Garden.” The March 15 class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon, at the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville. Master Gardener Robin Stanley and retired CALFIRE Chief Deputy Director Mark Stanley will help you balance aesthetics and

safety to increase the chance that your house and property can withstand a wildfire -- attendees will leave class with an individualized list of recommended changes.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 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.