



Living with Fire and a Drought

Robin Stanley

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

It was hard to live in El Dorado County last summer and fall without realizing the impact of fire on our neighbors and ourselves. Whether you were breathing smoke, watching the fairgrounds being transformed into a small city of firefighters, reading the daily fire updates, or packing your possessions in the event you had to be evacuated, many residents were affected by the Sand Fire or the King Fire in some way.

Since 2003, Master Gardener Robin Stanley and her husband Mark, retired CAL Fire Chief Deputy Director, have offered classes and presentations on fire-wise landscaping. But we always say that nobody listens as attentively as when there is smoke in the air. So you might wonder why we teach the class in winter (this year, on January 24), when fire danger is typically lower than in the summer. The reason is quite simple - it's because this is the time of year that you can most effectively take action and most easily dispose of material you have cleared on your property.

In our classes, we try to focus on some key points to keep in mind when looking at your property through a fire-wise lens. These include the three R's – "Remove, Reduce and Replace."

- REMOVE through elimination of dead or dying material or other hazardous fuel sources.
- REDUCE and space out remaining plantings to eliminate the continuous line of vegetation that can serve as ladder fuels. Ladder fuels can be dry grass, shrubs or small trees which grow so close together that they allow fire to move up into the tops of trees, causing it to spread more quickly.
- REPLACE by replanting selected areas or even planting a new landscape. In either case, there are more plant options than ever, many of which are not as water thirsty as you might expect.

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Although it might be surprising to some, the work you do on reducing the fire risk of your property can actually result in a healthier and more attractive landscape. Particularly for those at the higher elevations, where conifers dominate the natural landscape, thinning out and maximizing your existing landscape can result in plants that face less competition for water, sunlight, and nutrients.

Since the last several years have left the west facing the double threats of droughts and wildfires, it makes sense to expand our presentation to include more information about drought tolerant and native plants that are also fire-resistant. So this year, we will be joined by UCCE Master Gardener Alice Cantelow, who is also president of the Native Plant Society. Alice will be sharing expert advice about the kinds of plants that can do just this kind of double duty. Like many plants, most drought tolerant plants benefit from being planted during cool weather, rather than in late spring and summer when gardeners often think about planting. That's another reason for holding our class when we do.

We hope you'll join us on January 24, 2015 from 9:00 AM to noon in the El Dorado County Building C, Government Center Hearing Room, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville. Our goal for the free class is that participants will leave with a specific plan for their property that will improve it in terms of fire safety and water conservation, as well as increase its sustainability and aesthetics. If you can't make the class, but want more information on this topic, check out my Mountain Democrat article from last year on the Weather Resilient Garden. It can be found at this link: <http://ucanr.edu/theresilientgarden>, or on our Master Gardener website under Articles. On the same website, you can find a whole section of Fire Safety Resources by clicking on the Internet Resources button on the left side of the home page.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the 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://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and you can also find us on Facebook.