

Landscaping For Fire Safety –You Can't Think Too Much About It.

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After the 4 or 5 fires in the last few weeks, we need to think about how our landscaping could help to reduce the hazards of wildfire around our homes. It makes us all a little nervous this time of year when we see smoke billowing up from nearby hillsides. There are some things that you as a home gardener can do to reduce the threat of wildfire to your home. It is important to note, however, that there is no such thing as a plant that will not burn. Fire resistant is a term that is used for some landscape plants, but it is somewhat of a misnomer. If there is enough heat and other conditions are right, all plants will burn. Your goal with planting fire resistant plants is to try to maintain them to reduce the impact of fire and to provide for a defensible space around your home. The best way to do that is to provide an irrigated landscape, avoid or limit the use of flammable mulches near your home, and avoid growing “fire ladders.” Fire ladders are a progression of low to tall plants that increases the potential for fires in the crowns of trees. Also low branched trees, and trees with dead branches increase the potential of fire injury. Pruning the branches up will reduce the ability of fire to move up into the canopy. The most important tool is irrigation. Irrigation allows plants to retain more moisture and reduce the ability for it to burn. Even in low or generally unirrigated landscapes, if you can provide one or two irrigations in midsummer, it may make the difference between being extremely flammable and one that does not readily burn.

Finally, removal of any excess fuel loads will reduce the hazard as well. Keep plants separated from each other and avoid continuous plantings that spread fire.

Wherever possible, chaparral should be replaced by low or discontinuous ground covers

that will develop less fuel. This is especially important for those of you who have your houses on hill tops overlooking canyons that may be dense with chaparral because fire tends to race uphill.

There are some plants that are identified as “Fire Resistant.” These are plants that have low resin content, low fuel volume, or are very succulent. A plant with a low fuel volume will still burn but it produces a lower-intensity fire than a plant with a high fuel volume. Some suggested plants that have low to moderate fuel volumes at maturity are:

Trees	Shrubs or low growers	Ground Covers
Maple Acer sp.	Manzanita Arctostaphylos spp.	Cape weed Arctotheca calendula
Strawberry Tree Arbutus unedo	Rockrose Cistus spp	Prostrate coyote bush Caccharis pilularis
Incense cedar Calocedrus decurrens	Bush Morning Glory Convolvulus cneorum	Creeping Coposma Coprosma kirkii
Pittosporum Pittosporum spp.	Myoporum Myoporum spp.	Trailing Gazania Gazania rigens leucolana
Cotton wood Populus spp	Oleander Nerium oleander	Trailing African Daisy Osteospermum fruticosum
Quaking aspen Populus tremuloides	Italian buckthorn Rhamnus alaternus	Lavender Cotton Santolina spp.
Pomegranate Punica granatum	Currant, gooseberry Ribes sp.	Vinca Vinca spp.
Coast live oak Quercus agrifolia	Cape Honeysuckle Tecomaria capensis	
Blue Oak Quercus douglasii	California Bay Laurel Umbellularia californica	
California black oak Quercus kellogii		
Valley Oak Quercus lobata		

It is important to note that it is difficult to mix native plantings with irrigated plantings. Native species generally will not tolerate regular irrigation once established though some do better with some water during the summer months. In all cases, irrigated plants will resist fire more than unirrigated plants.

If you have gardening or pest questions, you can call or email the UC Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners or me at mgmariposa@ucdavis.edu. The Master Gardeners are in the office on Thursdays from 9-noon.