

# 'Firescaping' an extra hedge from damage in dry, dangerous weather

**Landscapers and homeowners often make unwise planting decisions. A seemingly simple choice of gardening strategy can quickly cook one's goose.**

By James E. Guyette

■ A racing wildfire shows no mercy to whomever or whatever is in its path—and it respects no neighborhood economic boundaries as it performs its wicked dance of death. Plants in the way will literally explode.

But landscape managers in at-risk regions can extinguish some of the likelihood of damage by using "firescaping"—the term applied to landscape designs that make use of fire-retardant plants, prudent pruning and placement.

"The idea is to keep as much potential fuel away from the house as possible," says Bill Norton, owner-operator of South Coast Landscaping in Santa Barbara, Calif.—an area where local history is recounted by citing the serious fires of years gone by. "We're trying to do a landscape layout that's not going to facilitate a burn," he points out.

"You don't really want to have the liability of telling people it's *fire resistant*," cautions Randy Baldwin, general manager at Santa Barbara's San Marcus Growers. "What you are doing is recommending plants that are less likely to carry the fire."

The specific species can vary in any given situation, but in general a fire-retardant plant will have a high moisture content and its growing pattern will hug the ground. Oddly enough, often a plant that's fire-retardant will also be drought-resis-

tant. "Most of your succulents are very efficient water users," says Baldwin.

"You have to embrace the whole concept of low-fuel and proper pruning" when selling such a service to residents, Baldwin notes. "No one really calls up and says, 'Give us your firescape mix,' but interest does pick up after a fire."

**Money to burn**—While the mostly upscale housing stock in rugged Santa Barbara adheres to stringent fire-resistant design requirements mandated by authorities, these construction aspects can be made moot in a moment if the yard is not up to snuff.

"Landscapers and homeowners are the biggest abusers" when it comes to making unwise planting decisions, says Norton. A seemingly simple choice of gardening strategy can quickly cook one's goose when the sky gets black with smoke.

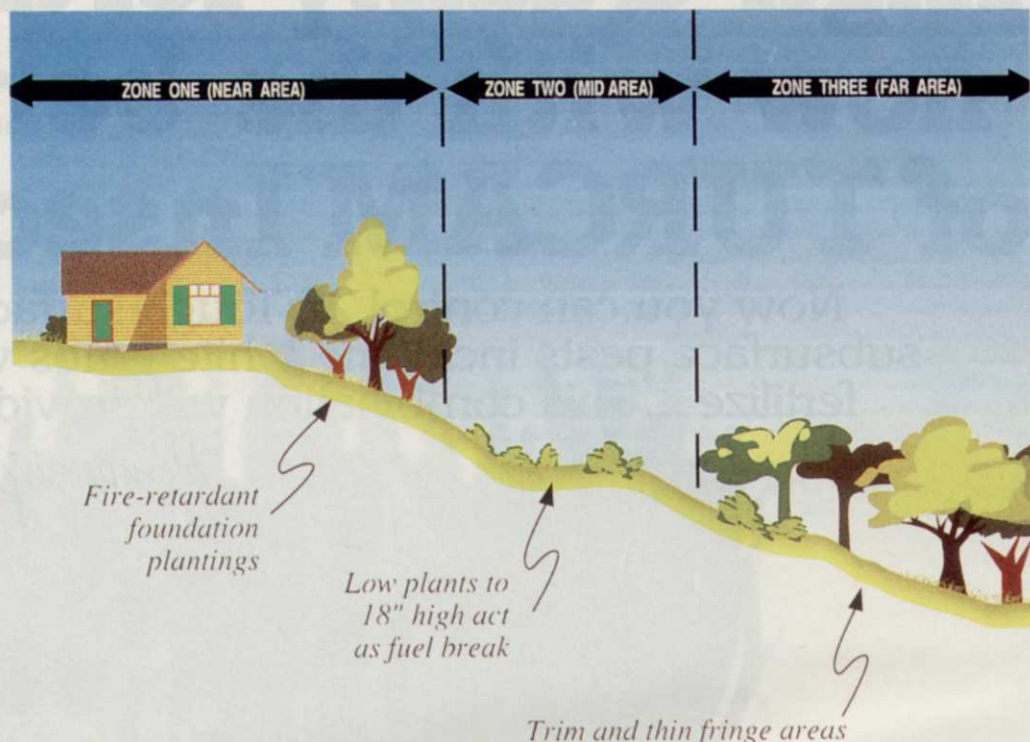
Landscape managers in any fire-prone region need to make this a priority. "Even in our maintenance practices we discuss

and reveal potential problems with the foliage up against the house," Norton reports. "We may mention it several times and urge them to remove the material for safety's sake—but the ultimate decision lies with the homeowner," he observes.

"It's a matter of placing the plant material," says John Brair, president of Acorn Landscaping in Santa Barbara. "We incorporate them (fire-retardant species) into our designs and we plant lesser volumes of plant material against the house."

The local fire department has even installed a model firescape garden that lets people see first-hand the selection of suitable materials. Four zones are mapped out over a 200-foot line. Zone One is closest to the house and Zone Four the farthest away. Zone One stretches 30 feet. (From 30 feet away, a wildfire can ignite a piece of furniture setting behind a window inside a house.)

**Pumping up**—Selling this preventive *continued on page 21*



**Fire protection 'zones' may reduce or prevent damage. Zone 1 is the first 30 feet around the house. Zone 2 covers the next 30-to-70 feet away from the house. Zone 3 includes fringe areas adjacent to wildlands or open space.**

*(Chart materials page 21 and this photo originally produced by the East Bay Municipal Utility District, Oakland, Calif.)*



# PLANTS WITH SOME FIRE RESISTANCE\*

**FIRE** continued from page 16

type of landscape design and maintenance plan is largely an untapped resource that only sparks attention when fire strikes. Sadly, the people most likely to be hit by fire are those who can afford to spend a little extra money ahead of time.

"It tends to be the large lots out on the fringes," explains Susan Van Atta of Van Atta & Black Landscape Architects in Santa Barbara. "These are the 'view' properties, so it's in the high-end developments where the fires occur," she adds.

"There's a marketing opportunity here, but you have to know what you're doing," Van Atta adds. "There's a lot of opportunity for maintenance work and there's a lot of labor to be sold with the proper application of expertise."

**Where there's smoke**—Expertise is the key

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word. "There are a lot of wrong ways but no one right way," Van Atta warns. "You need to educate yourself a lot because it's still evolving. There's tremendous variability, so the solutions each time won't be the same."

After each fire, authorities investigate and try to offer measures that will water down the chances of a repeat disaster, and thus landscape managers must always be alert for changes in the conventional wisdom of fire prevention.

Wind, humidity and temperature combine with topography, water flow and just plain old bad luck in determining who gets burned and who doesn't. "In the old days they used to just keep things cut low and remove all the existing vegetation," Van Atta recalls. "But that creates a tremendous scar on the hillside. Without the trees and vegetation, you don't have wind protection or erosion protection."

A landscape manager can provide a valuable service to customers in fire-prone areas by helping to prevent more serious losses. "Maybe it's not something that you can make a living from, but you can sure earn a lot of credit by educating people," Norton notes.

"You really have to educate people," Van Atta stresses. "After a while, people seem to forget, but your biggest sales pitch is what people see in the newspaper and on the news."

—The author is a freelance writer based in South Euclid, Ohio. He specializes in the green industry.

\*A partial list. Growing conditions in yards and maintenance techniques and

timing affect the relative fire-resistance and drought tolerance of plants. Those which generally have some fire-resistance are noted, as well as those which may suffer freeze damage inland. Spp. indicates more than one species is commonly grown.

R = Some fire-resistance F = May freeze inland

### TREES

	Genus/species	Common name
R	<i>Arbutus unedo</i>	Strawberry tree
R	<i>Ceratonia siliqua</i>	Carob tree
R	<i>Cercis occidentalis</i>	Western redbud
R	<i>Cercocarpus betuloides</i>	Mt. Mahogany
R	<i>Quercus agrifolia</i>	Coast live oak
	<i>Pistacia chinensis</i>	Chinese pistach
R	<i>Rhus lancea</i>	African sumac

### GROUNDCOVERS

	Genus/species	Common name
RF	<i>Aloe spp.</i>	Aloe
R	<i>Arctotheca calendula</i>	Capeweed
R	<i>Armeria spp.</i>	Sea pink
R	<i>Coprosma kirkii</i>	Prostrate mirror plant
RF	<i>Drosanthemum floribundum</i>	Ice plant
R	<i>Duchesnea indica</i>	Mock strawberry
RF	<i>Dymondia margaretae</i>	
R	<i>Festuca rubra 'Creeping'</i>	Creeping red fescue
R	<i>Fragaria chiloensis</i>	Wild strawberry
R	<i>Liriope gigantea</i>	Giant turf lily
	<i>Mahonia repens</i>	Creeping Oregon grape

### SHRUBS

	Genus/species	Common name
	<i>Arctostaphylos spp.</i>	Manzanita
R	<i>Atriplex spp.</i>	Saltbush
	<i>Berberis spp.</i>	Barberry
	<i>Ceanothus spp.</i>	California lilac
R	<i>Cistus spp.</i>	Rockrose
R	<i>Cotoneaster spp.</i>	Cotoneaster
R	<i>Escallonia spp.</i>	Escallonia
R	<i>Feijoa sellowiana</i>	Pineapple guava
R	<i>Galvesia speciosa</i>	Island bush snapdragon
	<i>Garrya elliptica 'Evie'</i>	Garrya
	<i>Gaura lindheimerii</i>	Gaura
R	<i>Heteromeles arbutifolia</i>	Toyon
R	<i>Nerium oleander</i>	Oleander
R	<i>Pittosporum spp.</i>	Mock orange
R	<i>Prunus ilicifolia</i>	Holly-leaved cherry
R	<i>Prunus lyonii</i>	Catalina cherry
R	<i>Punica granatum 'āna'</i>	Dwarf pomegranate
R	<i>Pyracantha 'Santa Cruz'</i>	Pyracantha