

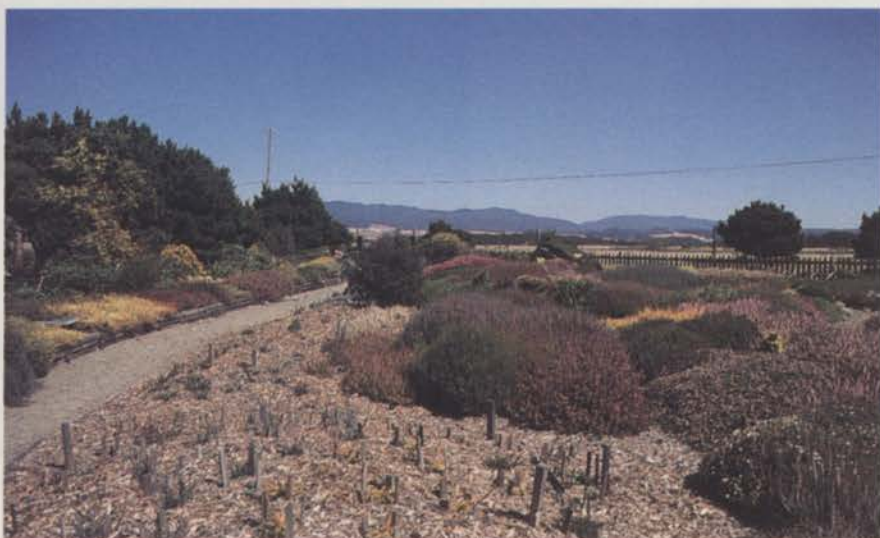
8 ways to make money on firescaping services

These new add-ons are spreading like wildfire—and not just in California. It's now a coast-to-coast enterprise.

by Maureen Gilmer

Wildfires have always been a concern to residents of the western U.S., but in recent years the threat is spreading to other areas of the country, including the East Coast, where conditions have changed for the worse.

The area in which the new risk is greatest, though, is in the Rocky Mountain states and Pacific Northwest. There, populations are exploding and more homes are cropping up in the urban-wildland inter-



Firescapes are often designed with low growing shrubs such as heathers, with gravel or decomposed granite walkways as fire breaks.

face—that zone where housing developments blend with ecosystems rich in fuel for fires.

The interest in “defensible space” homesite design and fire-resistant landscapes becomes more critical with each deadly wildfire.

Long-term landscape maintenance can eliminate fuel accumulations that can grow to dangerous proportions. This creates an opportunity for companies to tailor

new service packages to wildfire-vulnerable apartment and condominium complexes, commercial buildings, homeowner associations and single-family residences.

Some of the components of “firescaping” maintenance, which are more likely to be requested during fire season or just after a recent fire in a particular neighborhood:

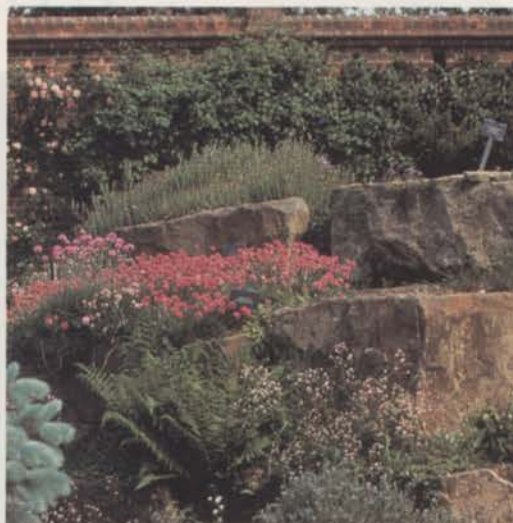
1) Pruning to keep proper separation and clearances must be ongoing. The edges of tree canopies must remain separated in order to reduce the tendency of flames to spread through continuous canopies. You may extend this service to cleaning up any tree litter which accumulates on rooftops and in rain gutters.

2) Weed and litter disposal. On the ground, sources of fuel like tree litter and weeds must be removed and disposed of. Here, too, separation of shrub and ground-cover plantings is used to interrupt the

rapid spread of flames, but as plants mature these spaces decrease and must be pruned and shaped.

3) Dead plant removal and replacement. If allowed to dry out—as did the vegetation of the Oakland Hills fire of 1991—a very hazardous condition results.

4) Irrigation system maintenance. Irrigation keeps firescape plants fully hydrated because the greatest threats come in the driest seasons.



Dwarf shrubs for rock gardens are frost hardy, and provide low/no fuel.

5) Compliance with local ordinances. Some communities are passing laws that demand homeowners control weeds and flammable vegetation on their property. In some cases, this calls for alteration of an existing ornamental landscape; in other cases it's the application of firescape concepts to native or naturalized wildland vegetation.

6) Comprehensive fuel management programs. You can cultivate clients in areas where services are most needed according to fire experts, and obtain leads from municipal fire stations or state fire protection agencies. Creating a dual package of services—one to alter the existing problem and another to make annual or biannual maintenance visits—assures you the initial clean-up job and a long-term regular customer.

7) Tapping the senior citizens market. For older homeowners who cannot accomplish the fire preventive maintenance work as easily as others, a landscape maintenance service is essential.

8) Increasing your public visibility. When you move into the firescape management and maintenance business, your work suddenly becomes a public service issue. Your company could eventually be placed in the public eye, should it save a home, a life or even an entire community.

Beforehand—It is basically the same to maintain a landscape designed for fire resistance and render an existing landscape less vulnerable to fire. Knowing how fuels accumulate, and how fuel types vary, should be considered for a comprehensive program and more accurate cost estimates

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for service.

Three types of fuels should be considered:

Aerial fuels are composed of tree canopies which feed crown fires that travel quickly from tree to tree. Rooftops are considered aerial fuels as well, particularly if wood shake or shingle.

Ground fuels exist from the soil surface to about 18 inches tall and are typically dry grass, leaves, litter, groundcovers and low-growing shrubs which feed a surface fire.

Ladder fuels fall between: taller shrubs and tree branches below 8-10 feet. They provide the "rungs" by which a surface fire jumps into trees or vice versa. The most dangerous fires are those which burn both on the ground and in tree

canopies simultaneously.

Also, before you attempt to mine the growing market for "defensible space," you must examine all the information already available on state and local wildfire conditions.

Many other factors (besides the choice of plant materials) should be considered, like topography, local wind conditions



Keeps colorful plants at 18 inches or less in height (above). Perennials at left are too high. Keep taller plants away from flammable wood walls.



and native fuel types. Where public lands or national parks are concerned—or even in private communities with strict CC&Rs, you must understand the regulations before attempting any work.

—Maureen Gilmer of Dobbins, Calif., has worked in virtually all aspects of horticulture and landscape design. She is author of "The Wildflower Survival Guide," a 176-page book available for \$10.95 from Taylor Publishing Co., Trade Books Division, 1550 W. Mockingbird Lane, Dallas, TX 75235; (800) 275-8188.

IPM book available from EPA

■ RISE is partnering with the National Pest Control Association (NPCA) and the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA) to distribute an U.S. EPA booklet.

That booklet tells schools how to adopt an integrated pest management (IPM) approach. The EPA developed the booklet in 1993 with the help of RISE.

"Although EPA did include responsible pesticide use information in the booklet, we believed some issues needed further emphasis to ensure a full understanding of responsible pesticide use and its role in IPM," says Tim Maniscalco of

DowElanco, who heads the Issues Committee's IPM in Schools Task Force.

Maniscalco says a plan is under way to distribute additional educational material to schools along with the booklet.

He points to the rigorous pesticide testing and registration process as an issue which needs more emphasis.

"Communicating this message helps reassure schools that pesticides pose low or no risk when used responsibly," he says.

In addition, the educational materials include information on why schools use pest control products and the RISE defini-

tion of IPM. The mailing also underscores the willingness of regulatory bodies and associations to work together toward a common cause.

Maniscalco encourages lawn care professionals and others to merchandise this effort at the state and local efforts and position themselves as IPM experts within their communities.

"Implementing an IPM program takes knowledgeable people who understand pests and how they can be monitored and controlled," says Maniscalco.