

## **Minimizing Fire Threat with Landscaping** **by Kathy Nunes**

Living in the Mother Lode is wonderful and our surroundings are beautiful, but it has challenges just like most places do. When I moved here from the Bay Area, I traded the fear of the big earthquake for the fear of loosing my home to wildfire! Thankfully there are ways to minimize this threat. There are some basic but important things that we can all do to create a fire safe landscape, and give our homes a fighting chance!

The most important thing is to create 100 ft. of “defensible space.” This is the area between a house (or other buildings) and a possible oncoming wildfire. The requirement mandated by California law was increased from 30 ft. to 100 ft. in 2005. Homes on slopes should consider the defensible space to be at least 150 ft. due to the fact that fire usually travels uphill. Defensible space should consist of three zones. By using the zone system, fire safe landscaping does not have to mean having a ring of bare dirt or rock around your home!

Zone 1 is the “Home Ignition Zone” - the first 10 ft. extending outward from the house.

- Keep the front of house vents clear of vegetation.
- Use only well irrigated and short herbaceous plants (non woody stems), ground cover and lawn.
- Eliminate tree limbs within 10 ft. of the house, deck or chimney.
- Don't use wooden trellises next to the house.
- Remember the importance of keeping a wooden deck clean – pine needles can build up in cracks!

Zone 2 is the “Lean, Clean and Green” Area - up to 30 ft. away from the house.

- “Lean” refers to thinning vegetation to create an open, park-like appearance.
- “Clean” means there is little or no accumulation of dead vegetation or flammable debris.
- “Green” specifies that the landscape is kept healthy, green and irrigated during fire season.
- For most of us, the Lean, Clean and Green zone is our residential landscape.

Zone 3 is the “Reduced Fuel Zone” – from 30 ft. to 100 ft. from the house (or to the end of the property line).

- This area may increase in size, depending on the slope of the property. This can diminish the “fire ladder” – where fire can travel uphill as it naturally does.
- This often consists of plants that were growing naturally before the yard was landscaped.

The following guidelines apply to all 3 zones:

- Removing fuels: Eliminate dead and dying shrubs and trees, dead weeds, fallen branches and pine cones. Remove pine needles and dead leaves over 3” deep. Clear the area underneath plants of debris.
- Reducing fuels: Prune dead limbs and lower branches from shrubs and trees and keep any dried grass mowed. Keep a distance of 10 ft. between large trees and maximize space between tree canopies where feasible. Wide spread areas of wood bark or wood mulch should be separated with plants or hardscape, creating fuel breaks and “islands.”
- Replacing fuels: Substitute dense shrubs with less flammable plants, deciduous trees and deciduous shrubs. Generally, most deciduous trees and shrubs are good because they have a lower fuel volume when dormant and higher moisture content when in leaf. Consider using pavers, rocks and gravel as replacements where realistic.

When shopping for new fire resistant plants, remember to keep your selection to those that grow in our USDA zone (most of us are in USDA zone 7). Always take into account the width and height of plants when mature. Keep in mind that all plants can burn – there are no fire proof plants!

### Other important points:

- Minimize the use of highly combustible coniferous shrubs and trees such as juniper, pines and plants with resinous sap, volatile oil, wax or pitch.
- Plants that are more ignition-resistant tend to have high moisture content, are usually low growing and are not dense.
- For trees taller than 18 feet, remove lower branches within 6-10 ft. of the ground.
- Remove shrubs from under tall trees – irrigated lawn, ground cover and short herbaceous plants will reduce the “fire ladder” effect.
- Maintain landscape by regularly watering where needed and removing dead branches, leaves and needles.
- Remove vegetation within 10 feet of woodpiles and stack the wood at least 30 feet from all structures.
- Maintain 10 feet of clearance on exposed sides of LPG tanks (butane and propane).
- Move or remove all stacks of construction materials and other flammable debris.
- Some use of wood bark and wood mulches is acceptable, but it should be separated by less combustible plants and not used in wide spread areas.
- Use caution when operating equipment like lawnmowers – one spark may start a fire!

Finally, take an inventory of what modifications you can make and create a plan. By applying those changes, you can give firefighters a safe zone from which to battle fires. Protect your family and possibly the biggest investment you ever make – your home! For more information, refer to the Hwy 108 Fire Safety Council:

<http://www.tuolumnefiresafe.org>

*Kathy Nunes is a recent “transplant” to the Sierra foothills. She initially completed her Master Gardener training in the Bay Area and has taken additional training to become familiar with gardening challenges in the Mother Lode.*