

**NAPA REGISTER – HOME & GARDEN SECTION – SATURDAY,  
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**[SUGGESTED HEADLINE: GOT DEFENSIBLE SPACE?]**

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By Darren Drake, Fire Marshal, City of Napa Fire Department

The recent wildland fire near Yountville is a sobering reminder of just how vulnerable we are to the uncertainty of accidental and man-made fires. While firefighters can control about 97% of all wildfires, the remaining three percent of fires are so powerful that they overwhelm even the best-equipped agencies. Whatever the size of the fire, advance preparation *really* counts. In the case of the Yountville fire we were just plain lucky that the firefighters were able to contain the fire before it jumped the ridge and threatened the residents of Dry Creek.

While luck can be a factor in fire survivability, we don't suggest pinning your hopes on the roll of the dice. You can design and modify your home to resist wildfire. Even when firefighting forces are stretched to the limit, a Defensible Home has a far better chance of survival. This week we've got some reminders on how landscaping and planning can help defend your home and family. We also have some tips on where to get the professional help you need.

As we've said before, a crucial key to surviving wildfire and minimizing possible damage is defensible space, and the first goal in creating that space is the *reduction of fuel*. Simply put, this means the selective removal and thinning of plants that could feed and transfer a fire. Given time and natural rainfall – which we saw plenty of last winter – wildland plants and even landscaping can grow up to form an uninterrupted layer of vegetation. Unfortunately, the more continuous and dense the vegetation, the greater the “fuel load” and threat of wildfire. Separate patches of vegetation and widely dispersed individual plants are much less conducive to fire, so selective planting is very effective in decreasing the threat.

You create defensible space by establishing fire-resistant landscaping zones. Zone 1, is an area extending 30 feet out from the house or structure. This area should be planted with low-growing plants with low fuel-volume. Ideally tall-growing plants in close proximity to the structure should be minimized, but since we all enjoy the shade of a tree or two, select what you plant carefully, with fire prevention in mind. This means avoiding pine trees and other high-resin vegetation and removing overhanging tree limbs near the structure.

The next defensible space zone extends our safety area from 30 feet to 100 feet from the structure. Ideally, this is where you plant medium-height plants that are resistant to fire and also low in fuel volume. Low hedges, succulents, and even vegetable gardens go well in this zone. The outer edge of this zone is also considered a transition area where native vegetation has been thinned to reduce fuel volume and where spacing between large shrubs and trees is 20 feet or more.

With these zones in mind, smart landscaping or “firescaping” involves selecting plants with a careful eye to their ability to reduce wildfire threat. An overall rule of thumb is to minimize evergreen shrubs and trees within 3-5 feet of structures, because junipers, other conifers and broadleaf evergreens, such as eucalyptus, contain oils, resins and waxes that make these plants burn with great intensity. Ornamental grasses and berries can also be highly flammable, so use these sparingly. Instead, concentrate on “fire smart” plants, those with high moisture content and a low-growing habit, with stems and leaves that are not resinous, oily or waxy. Deciduous trees are generally more fire-resistant than evergreens because they have higher moisture content when in leaf, and lower fuel volume when dormant.

Once your fire-resistant plants are in place, remember to monitor and give them periodic maintenance. Even fire-resistant plants can lose this quality if allowed to load up with dead twigs, leaves and branches. Periodic pruning and cleaning will maintain their fire resistance and keep the appearance of your landscaping in good shape. Drip irrigation can aid, too, in keeping your plants healthy and well-hydrated.

There is plenty of help when it comes to selecting replacement plants or new landscaping. I suggest you start by visiting the Napa Firewise website ([www.co.napa.ca.us/firewise](http://www.co.napa.ca.us/firewise)) and click on “About Firewise” for a list of Firewise plants and resources. In the “Links” section there is even a list of approved defensible space contractors to call on for advice. In addition, you can call Napa Firewise at 707.967.1426 and request the free brochure, “*Living with Fire in Napa County.*” This brochure lists recommended plants and a wealth of helpful information on fire behavior and safety information. I also highly recommend contacting the Master Gardeners of Napa County at 707.253.4221. They have experts available to help guide your plant selections. See what I mean? There is plenty of help if you know where to look.

The manner in which a house is designed, its location and materials, fire department access and landscaping all influence survivability during a wildfire. When it comes to protecting your home, a well-maintained landscape is an excellent first line of defense.

About the author:

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