



John Roberts at work in the hills Photo Andy Scheck

# Time to Cut the Grass

By Sophie Braccini

**D**uring last week's "Wildfire Awareness Week," word of an unusually high fire danger this summer spread like, well, wildfire. This week marks the beginning of the 2008 fire season.

We haven't had such a warning since 1991," Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) Chief Pete Nowicki said at a recent meeting. "Because of the lack of rain at the end of the season, our fuel (grass and other vegetation that feeds wild fires) has a lower moisture content and is already at a July level of dryness." In addition, the grass is growing high and in patches separated by bare space. "This natural phenomenon creates conditions for wild fire to spread extremely rapidly, jumping from patch to patch, stimulated by air circulation between growing areas," adds Nowicki. That's why, he said, in case of wildfire, we will see his trucks moving way out in front of the flames.

Due to this very early high fire risk, MOFD Fire Marshal Mike Mentink recommends the early cutting of grass in all areas of Lamorinda. "Don't put off the cutting of your grass until later in the season," urges Mentink, do it now!"

One man in Moraga did not wait for the MOFD recommendation. John Roberts has been cutting grass for the Bruzzone family for thirty five years. On their powerful tractor, he's been roaming the hills for the past few weeks, making sure that there is no fuel left to feed a wildfire.

The theme of Wildfire Awareness Week incorporated the dual concepts of "Defensible Space is Your Responsibility" – remove flammable material near your home to keep a fire at bay, and "Wildfires : Will Your Home Survive" – reduce the risk that drifting embers will set your house aflame by using fire resistant building materials.

Mentink has plenty of advice for homeowners who wish to improve their fire safety. "The first thing of course is to build 100 feet of defensible space around your property," states Mentink.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention (Cal Fire) recommends removing all flammable vegetation within 30 feet of all structures, and in an additional 70 feet create a reduced fuel zone by spacing trees and plants from each other.

"The main (risk) is ignition through the spreading of hot embers, so you want your roof to be type A and you want to keep it free of pine needles and leaves. It's also important to keep decks free of flammable material, both on and under the decks, including vegetation. Decks are okay," says Mentink, but embers can get underneath."

If you want to go the extra mile and are thinking capital improvement, consider tempered glass when you choose your double-paned windows; they do better under fire for the same cost. For outside your home, stucco is excellent and if you redo your roof, besides the type A for the material, pay attention to the size of the vents underneath the eaves, which should be less than 1/4 inch in diameter to reduce the amount of embers that could get under your roof.

For more recommendations go to the Cal Fire website, [www.fire.ca.gov](http://www.fire.ca.gov), or call Fire Marshal Mentink at 258-4520.

Chief Nowicki feels that his team is ready and well equipped in the event of a fire emergency. As they have in the past, MOFD will receive extra help from Cal Fire. They will provide an extra engine that will be stationed in Orinda next to the freeway. "We will train with them and develop a real team spirit," said the Chief "This is very important in case something happens." Cal Fire has recently acquired a new helicopter that will be available in addition to the one belonging to the East Bay Regional Park District.

"But let's not forget the first rule: 100 feet of defensible space is the responsibility of each resident and our inspections will start soon," finished Nowicki.