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## Flame Out, Lamorinda

By Nick Marnell



Trees that once overhung this home were removed and a clean, open landscape was developed. Leaves are not allowed to collect in the roof valleys and rain gutters. Photos Dennis Rein, MOFD

This year, we've had several brush fires in the district already."

While both Lamorinda fire districts carry the responsibility of protecting property from fires, the most important person that can protect property from a wildfire is the property owner. One of the time-honored methods of property protection is to surround the property with defensible space - the space between the property and the wildland fire area that creates a buffer to slow down an onrushing fire. According to Laing, the easiest and most basic thing that a property owner can do is to control and abate the weeds.

MOFD requires, through ordinance, a defensible space of 100 feet from a structure but not beyond the property line. "Call us," said Dennis Rein, emergency preparedness coordinator. "We'll come out to your home and do a free assessment of your property." Marshall said that ConFire offers Lafayette residents that same courtesy. The goal in each district is to allow firefighters to stop fires spreading from open space areas to homes and properties.

This year comes with an added wrinkle, thanks to the recent state-mandated 25 percent water cutback. Residents will have to reduce water usage, but at the same time keep their outdoor plants from drying out and creating a fire hazard. Susie Bernhard of McDonnell Nursery in Orinda suggests plants that require low to moderate water, yet remain fire resistant, like yarrow, coreopsis and lantana. "They won't burst into flames," she said.

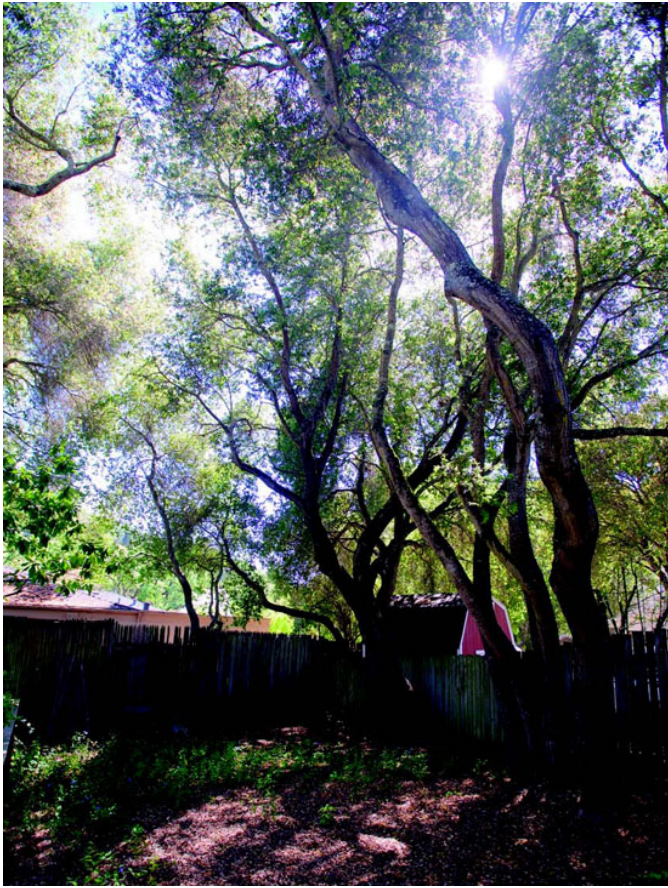
"The community deserves a lot of credit for its vigilance and caution," said Healy. He specifically praised the lack of fireworks, and the fact that people are not cutting their lawns during periods of high fire danger. MOFD fire marshal Kathy Leonard noted that the Wilder developers brought in over 1,000 sheep to graze the vegetation away. Regarding Lafayette residents' prevention efforts, "I give them a B-plus," said Laing.

Healy said that, since 1988, a vegetation fire has not destroyed a home in the district. It will take a concerted effort of the entire community to extend that streak another year.

Here we go again.

"I always hate to say it's going to be a bad fire season because we have all heard that same thing for so many years. But I am going to say it anyway," said Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Chief Jeff Carman. "I worry a lot about the Lafayette area of our district, with all of the wildland-urban interface area and high-value properties." Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Stephen Healy hardly disagrees. "We're sending out our weed abatement notices even earlier this year to give people more time to clear out the problem areas," he said. Robert Marshall, ConFire fire marshal, said the district will push earlier weed abatement this year as well.

Indeed, the fuels are dry this year, thanks to this fourth consecutive year of severely limited rainfall. "Hot, dry summers are the norm here," said ConFire's George Laing, fire prevention captain. "In April, things start drying out. By July, the brush fires begin. In August, the trees start to burn. The real fires hit in September and October.



Oak trees have been thinned, dead material cleaned out of the trees and ground, and fuels that could carry fire to the tops of these trees have been removed.

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