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On the Offense for Defensible Space

By Cathy Dausman



Tree limbs hanging over a roof is a no-no.

Photo Cathy Dausman

assessment, not an inspection. The purpose is to inform and educate, not cite or fine, she emphasized.

"We offer inspections all year long," said Leonard, "but the 'push' is from February to [the weed abatement deadline] June 15."

Before the trio reached the steps of our 45-year-old ranch house, they began their size-up, examining whether my landscape vegetation had a sufficient amount of space between plantings and the house itself.

Proper separation would prevent a brush fire from leapfrogging from grasses to bushes and into trees. I asked if one decorative tree needed its lower branches trimmed, or limbed up. The tree was adequately set back from the house so Leonard said no, although she suggested I trim a few errant limbs reaching toward our roofline. My foundation landscape (camellias, azaleas and rhododendron) was encroaching on the house. Woods suggested I clear a one or two foot space between the plants and the house. He noted our double pane windows would protect against the radiant heat from an outside fire igniting anything inside, like curtains or furniture set close to the windows.

Next on the list: inspecting our old and battered wire mesh foundation vents. The vents allow foundation air circulation, but where air enters, so can hot embers.

Leonard explained that homes adjacent to wildland fires might appear to be unaffected but could quickly burn to the ground from ember intrusion. Installing newer vents sounded like money well spent.

"Keep that space clear of leaves," Mislant said, spotting an odd triangular space where the garage roofline abutted the house. Woods suggested replacing a portion of our new backyard gate with a piece of composite wood trim, isolating the wooden fence from the wooden siding. Then the trio spotted half-empty paint cans I had set out to recycle, leaving them temporarily baking in the hot sun - how embarrassing!

More embarrassment followed when Leonard spotted marine batteries we have stored underneath our eaves. The battery cache is intended to provide emergency power; I never realized they might become a fire hazard.

Leonard, Woods and Mislant approved of our enclosed, artificial back deck, but they did point

Four years into the latest California drought, wildland fires present a nearly year-round threat. The same vegetation that allows Lamorinda to call itself "semi-rural" is now bone dry.

What's to stop a wildland fire from knocking at your door? Without preventative measures, the answer is very little.

With an ounce of prevention in mind, I volunteered my home exterior for inspection by the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. The assessment took an hour, cost nothing, and I learned a lot. Belated apologies to my neighbor, who panicked when three uniformed fire department personnel arrived unannounced (to him) at my house!

In the last year or two, MOFD fire marshal Kathy Leonard and two deputies, district aides Steven Woods and Jessica Mislant, have completed more than 50 exterior home inspections. Leonard is quick to point out this is a voluntary program, an

out tree branches arching dangerously close to our roof. Although the roof was a fire-retardant composite, there were leaves aplenty choking our gutter screens. I needed to clean the gutters and trim encroaching branches back from roofline and chimneys. Our back slope was largely weed free (we tackled that project last month), earning us kudos, but the area under our pine tree was a bed of needles. I asked about that tree, plus the towering pines in neighboring yards.

"Really watch the [pine] trees," Leonard said. "Their needles are oily, the drought has made them even more susceptible [to damage and disease] and they only live to about 40 years," she warned. Diablo Fire Safe Council offers grants to help with the cost of limbing up pine trees, said Executive Director Cheryl Miller.

"It keeps the fire on the ground where it is easier to contain," she said. "We have had several homeowners work together to target trees that concern them." Where fire is concerned, "there is no benefit to sugar coating the danger posed to the Lamorinda area," said Captain George Laing of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, whose jurisdiction includes Lafayette. "Everybody should be aware that conditions toward the end of summer approximate the conditions found at the time of the Oakland Hills fire."

Laing said ConFire is glad to inspect home exteriors to determine the hazards posed by a wildland fire approaching a home - the risk of ignition to the home itself and the ability of firefighters to defend that home. Vegetation management is the key to a home's ability to resist ignition, he said.

In spite of multiple minor infractions, our house exterior was deemed a "good defensible space." (Whew!) Leonard said she would love to perform more exterior inspections, particularly in the Moraga area.

Although her staff has been more aggressive this year on weed abatement, Leonard says citing and fining residents won't necessarily change their behavior. She strives for a balance between public safety and homeowner expenses, but says "at the end of the day, it's my job to see firefighters go home [safely] at night."

For more information:

Moraga-Orinda Fire District: www.mofd.org, (925) 258-4525, Ext. 524.

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District: www.cccfpd.org (925) 941-3324

Diablo Fire Safe Council: www.diablofiresafe.org/

Ember/flame resistant materials: <http://firecenter.berkeley.edu/bwmg/vents-2.html>



MOFD Fire Marshal Kathy Leonard (left) and Fire Prevention aide Steven Woods evaluate brush proximity to siding at the reporter's house.



MOFD aide Jessica Misleng shows where leaves could collect on a roofline, increasing fire danger.
Photos Cathy Dausman

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