

Landscaping for Beauty & Fire Safety

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Broom is a very competitive plant that can outgrow natives and ornamentals. Landowners must repeatedly monitor the site, removing any new plants that have sprouted from seed. If the ground has been disturbed, plant native bunch grasses or other native ground cover to prevent erosion on level sites. Shrubs provide the best slope stabilization.

As homeowners our concerns go beyond wanting to reduce the danger from wildfires. Most of us hope for an aesthetically pleasing landscape that provides privacy, family areas, wildlife habitat, and is also sustainable. A sustainable landscape lowers the impact on the environment by preventing erosion, reducing the use of water, fertilizer and pesticides.

There is often a conflict between needing to maintain the 10-foot road clearance and the desire for screening from roads and neighbors. The Fire Safe Council of Nevada County offers a booklet listing native and non-native, low flammable plants for screening & other landscape uses.

Often we leave a clump of small pines or cedars to provide screening. In this crowded situation the screening will soon be lost as the lower branches die from shading. Choose broad-leaved, evergreen shrubs that have a mature height of 6 to 8 feet. Coffeeberry, Toyon and Silk tassel are native shrubs that can be used for screening. Plant the screening in staggered clumps rather than creating a fire pathway with a row of vegetation.

The beauty of using native plants is that they need little to no summer irrigation after 3 years. Natives provide nesting and roosting sites for birds, provide food for insects that are the mainstay of bird diet.

Traditional landscape design uses extensive foundation plantings. This is definitely not a good choice in a fire prone area. The first 10 feet from the structure should be as lean as possible. Keep planting height at 12 inches. Or better yet, install the walks next to the foundation & place the plants 6 to 10 feet from the structure. Choose a plant that will grow to the size you want rather than needing to trim on a regular schedule. Trimmed plants take more irrigation, more nutrients and provide a succulent treat for disease, insects and deer.

The key to firewise landscaping is location, location, location. Maintain a lush look by establishing clear areas between groups of plants. This separation can slow a fire and keep it from crowning.

Trees provide many benefits. Shading from the south and west sun is provided by trees growing 20 to 30 feet from a structure. As the trees grow, remove the lower limbs to provide clearance at 8 feet for walkways and 15 feet over roads and drives.

Look out over the 100-foot zone and imagine a park-like vista with open and shaded areas, clumps of shrubs, wildflowers and maybe even a meadow or pond. A firewise landscape can support diversity of wildlife, be beautiful and protect lives and structures.

To learn more about Scotch Broom, visit the Fire Safe Council of Nevada County's website at www.areyoufiresafe.com. To learn more about ornamental landscaping visit the UC Master Gardener's of Nevada County website at <http://ucanr.org/sites/ucmgnevada/>. Make plans to visit the Home & Garden show on April 28-29, 2012 and attend the workshop on controlling Scotch broom and visit both the Fire Safe Council and Master Gardener's booths.