

Preparing your home for wildfire season? **Here's what you need to know**

The Press Democrat

As a relative newcomer to the North Bay, I'll admit I didn't know much about how to best protect my home from wildfires.

But, experts tell me there are many misconceptions even among those who are more seasoned, informed and have lived through the trauma of catastrophic wildfires in recent years.

In part, that's because our understanding has evolved a lot in recent years.

"We have learned so much about home ignition in the last 10 years, not only through laboratory research ... but through bitter experience because we've lost so many homes," said Caerleon Safford, a department analyst in fire prevention for Permit Sonoma, Sonoma County's Permit and Resource Management Department.

While we tend to think of wildfires as the giant walls of flames that dominate media coverage, in the vast majority of cases where homes catch fires, Safford said, the cause is "something that probably is the size of a pea, or more accurately, 50 things that are the size of a pea" - embers.

"And, that is where defensible space and structure hardening get really important," she told me.

Upgrading homes and maintaining property to be more fire safe can feel like a daunting and costly task — and it can be, especially for older, disabled and low-income residents.

But, professionals say there are a lot of low and sometimes no-cost easy steps to take that are actually also the most effective, starting with the area right around the house.

Defensible space

“My experience is that even people who are very educated and aware and experienced, are still not understanding the priorities, which generally emphasize preparing a property from the structure outward, not the land inward,” said Stuart Mitchell.

He runs Wildfire Mitigation Advisors, a Santa Rosa-based firm providing wildfire property assessments, community education and real estate and insurance compliance analyses.

That means focusing on the zero to five-foot zone around the home and worrying later about the big eucalyptus 35 feet out.

Start with being mindful of anything that, if an ember landed on it, could catch fire — doormats, umbrellas, cushions on a lawn chair, a recycling bin overflowing with cardboard, mulch. These are the types of things that should be minimized or stowed away on a red flag warning day when there’s increased risk of fire.

“It’s the easiest defensible space hack there is,” Fire Safe Sonoma CEO and President Roberta MacIntyre told me. “It costs you nothing.”

“We have been really good about telling people that plants are a big risk,” Safford said. “What we haven’t been as good at doing is, ‘So is that basket full of driftwood that’s sitting on your wooden deck right up against your wooden wall.’ We tend to not see ‘stuff.’ That’s often one of the most egregious risks.”

Harden & defend: Resources to shore up wildfire vulnerability at home

Property hardening and defensible space resources:

CAL FIRE tool kits and guidelines: [www.-readyforwildfire.org](http://www.readyforwildfire.org)

United Policyholders’ Wildfire Risk Reduction and Asset Protection Initiative (WRAP) reference library (with home insurance in mind): uphelp.org/preparedness/wrap-resource-center

Fire-wise landscape design and management tips available via the Resilient Landscapes Coalition resilientlandscapescoalition.org

Sonoma County programs:

Information on the Sonoma County Wildfire Adapted program that provides free defensible space and structure hardening assessments and eventually rebates in certain areas is available at: permitsonoma.org/socoadapts

Email WildfireAdapted@sonoma-county.org or call 707-565-8575 with questions.

Information on the free curbside Chipper Program, guidelines for participation and to apply, visit permitsonoma.org/chipperprogram

When it does come to landscaping, using gravel or cement in the five-foot range is ideal, but if not, think about plant choice and separating combustible vegetation into islands, preferably in fire resistant pots, to disrupt fuel continuity.

Address questions to Chipper@sonoma-county.org or call 707-565-6070

Choose low-growing plants. The best options are ones that don't shed and create a mess and aren't as flammable. For instance, aloe vera causes a lot less problems than rosemary or juniper. Either way, keeping any plants hydrated and clear of dropped debris is key.

In the five-to-30-foot zone, Safford likes to say "lean, clean and green." Avoid bushes right up next to each other and get rid of dead and dying material. Keep wood piles 30-plus feet away if there is space on the property.

After that, residents can look toward maintaining the thirty-to-100-foot area if applicable, but "just do that zero to five if you can't do anything else," Safford said.

Home hardening

While the focus should be "structure out" for defensible space, when it comes to fortifying the home against flame, the mantra is "top down."

As large, relatively flat surfaces, roofs can be a dangerous gathering place for embers. Most people don't know what kind of roof they have so it's worth getting a roof inspection if possible.

They should be Class A, meaning metal or certain composition shingles. At the very least, it's important to keep roofs and gutters clear of debris throughout fire season. Metal gutter covers are a good tool.

While you're at it, keep combustible materials in the attic to a minimum.

In every conversation I had, retrofitting or upgrading vents also came up as a top priority.

All underfloor, attic, crawl space and other such vents should be replaced with [wildland-urban interface-compliant vents](#). A lower cost option is to purchase a roll of 1/8 to 1/16-inch metal mesh at the hardware

store and use it to cover the vent openings.

Using metal mesh or the like to screen off the vertical edges of wooden decking is also a great way to block embers from entering underneath and keep out debris and varmints.

Be aware, too, of where a fence meets a house.

“That’s another thing that we learned in this last rash of fires,” Safford told me. “If you have a wooden fence attached to a wooden house, you’re gonna have damage.”

Replacing the last five feet of fence in that case with a metal gate, for example, can make a huge difference.

Professionals emphasized that every property is different, and it’s worth getting an assessment of the vulnerabilities on individual homes. However, these recommendations are a great baseline, and not only for those in the highest risk areas.

“Coffey Park has proved this out,” MacIntyre said. “You don’t have to live in a ‘wildfire hazard zone’ to be at risk for wildfire.”

The Tubbs Fire in October 2017 devastated the Coffey Park neighborhood, where an estimated 1,400 structures in northwest Santa Rosa, mostly detached homes, were leveled in the inferno.

All these considerations are also important in the context of the home insurance crisis as [insurers cancel policies or refuse to insure](#) more and more homes in California.

While making properties more fire safe won’t necessarily protect homeowners from that fate, a [new rule soon in effect](#) will require insurance companies to offer discounts to those who mitigate fire risks at home.

United Policyholders, a nonprofit consumer advocacy group, [provides helpful resources](#) on this front.

Thinking of first responders

It’s not just residents and their neighbors who benefit when homes are prepared to better withstand

wildfire.

Mitchell pointed out that it's a huge help for firefighters and other first responders who jump into action when wildfires take off.

"If you hide your home away and cover it with fuel, they're going to have to be like, 'No.' They have to be prejudicial and triage," Mitchell said.

When preventive steps are taken, "You're reducing stress and confusion, you're helping them directly, and you're also helping yourselves potentially, too."

Mitchell told me poor signage is a ubiquitous issue he encounters during assessments, especially in rural areas.

To counter that, use dual metal reflective address signs at a main road and additional signage leading up any private or dirt roads with turnoffs, as well as a clear address sign on the house itself.

Consider adding a sign at an early point indicating if there is space for a turn-around or water assets nearby. Take padlocks off release pins on private gates if possible.

"These are details that can be delaying, frustrating and extremely dangerous," he said.

Investing in community risk reduction

Overall, there is a need to emphasize and support efforts to harden and defend communities against wildfire, a tricky task because it requires buy-in and community-mindedness from residents. That applies to outreach and education but also funding.

"I think we're still very concerned with addressing very large landscapes," Safford said.

"It's harder to do the home side than it is to do the wildland side. ... I'm not trying to dismiss the importance of large landscape-scale fuels reduction because they're important not only to reduce the spread and intensity of wildfire, but also because our environment needs it."

But, Mitchell pointed out that there needs to be a much bigger funding focus on fire prevention close to

and in communities, such as propping up programs to help low- and middle-income homeowners harden their properties.

These promise [immediate bang for the buck](#).

“You can harden a property with the right resources in a week,” he said. “Managing the forest, that takes decades.”

In Sonoma County, there are a couple of programs that can help residents get prepared.

The [Wildfire Adapted](#) program provides free defensible space and structure hardening assessments in 14 areas with heightened fire hazards and other risk factors. The second phase of the pilot project will include up to \$10,700 in rebate incentives for property owners to shore up identified vulnerabilities.

Officials are hoping to roll that part out in 2024.

There’s also a [free curbside chipper program](#) for people clearing trees and woody debris around their properties to create defensible space.

Overall, the county has about \$12 million in active grants funding various fire threat prevention programs.

In 2021, President Joe Biden announced Sonoma County would receive \$37 million in funding due to the catastrophic wildfires it experienced through FEMA’s Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities [\(BRIC\) grant program](#).

A first \$7.5 million chunk of that was awarded in November 2022. The county will use those funds to scale up its home hardening, defensible space and [hazardous fuels reduction](#) programs and undertake additional projects.

The first steps requiring stakeholder coordination, environmental review and home hardening assessments are underway and will likely take until spring of 2025.