

Living in the Forest
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Living in the foothills and forests provides many pleasures – beautiful surroundings, ample recreation opportunities, sharing our habitat with the local wildlife – but it also presents significant challenges. The recent years of drought and the threat of wildfire (as we've seen in neighboring counties) serve as stark reminders that our community also is at risk.

What can we do to be ready for fire, improve the odds for our home and surroundings, and protect the natural beauty around us? There are many excellent resources available to help residents evaluate and improve the fire safety of our homes. CAL FIRE's website, www.ReadyForWildfire.org, is a great place to start, with tips for creating defensible space around the home, hardening the home itself to reduce the chances of ignition, and choosing fire resistant plants and landscape materials. More information can be found from the Amador Master Gardeners website (https://ucanr.edu/sites/Amador_County_MGs/) by clicking on 'Internet Resources' and then the link for 'Fire Safety Resources', and the Amador Fire Safe Council at www.AmadorFireSafe.org/.

Within the 30-foot zone closest to the home, provide ample space between plants to slow the spread of fire. Remove dry flammable material, from leaves to dead branches and dry grasses. Choose high moisture plants that grow low to the ground with an open structure and a low resin content. Remember that plants grow, so maintenance is needed every year. Remove overhanging branches near the house. To reduce ladder fuels, limb up trees 6' or more (but no more than 1/3 of the tree's total height). Also move the wood pile beyond the 30' zone.

From 30 to 100' (or the property line), keep annual grasses mowed, trees and shrubs pruned and spaced to avoid fire ladders, and remove dry, dead material and undesirable vegetation (weeds, tree seedlings, brush sprouts) to maintain vertical and horizontal spacing between the desirable plants.

Many fire-resistant plants work well in the home landscape. Low-growing native shrubs and forbs such as bearberry manzanita (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), California fuchsia (*Epilobium*), foothill penstemon (*Penstemon heterophyllus*) and showy milkweed (*Asclepias sp.*) bring seasonal color to the yard, are drought tolerant, and beneficial for wildlife.

Don't ignore weeds – many non-native grasses and other invasive plants spread aggressively and will take advantage of the open landscape. Scotch broom, yellow starthistle, oblong spurge and tree of heaven, for example, will outcompete more desirable vegetation and are easiest to control when they first appear. See the UC Integrated Pest Management website (<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/>) for information on ways to control these invasive plants.

Finally, work with neighbors to clear vegetation along your access roads – both overhead and along the road edge – to ensure a safe escape route for you and access for emergency vehicles, especially in the event of a fire. If your community needs help ensuring safe ingress and egress, the Amador Fire Safe Council may be able to assist with roadside clearance.

The bottom line: To fully realize the many benefits of living in the forest, we must each do our part to create a more fire-safe environment, from the defensible zone around our homes to the access roads into and out of our neighborhoods and beyond.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of Amador County website at <http://ucanr.edu/mgamador>. UCCE Master Gardeners of Amador County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Thursday, 10:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (209) 223-6838. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 12200-B Airport Rd. in Jackson. You can also find us on Facebook. We offer free classes every month and we'll have an educational booth at the County fair. Join us!