

# S.A.F.E. LANDSCAPES IN THE WUI



UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA  
**Agriculture &  
Natural Resources**



UC Cooperative Extension  
Los Angeles County

## SAFE Landscapes (Sustainable and Fire Safe)

can help you create and maintain fire-safe, environmentally-friendly landscapes in the wildland-urban interface.

Fire is a part of the natural environment in Southern California. If you live in a high fire hazard severity zone in the wildland-urban interface, it is not a question of IF a fire will occur, but when. Preparation requires that YOU take responsibility for your safety, property, and pets in the event of a fire.

## The Wildland Urban Interface

The wildland urban interface (WUI) is the area where urban and suburban development meet native, natural vegetated areas. It can be a beautiful place to live, but with the benefits of being near nature come risks and responsibilities. One of the most pressing risks is wildfire, but others include interactions with dangerous wildlife like bears, rattlesnakes, and mountain lions, and physical phenomena like floods and landslides. Responsibilities include being a good steward to neighboring wildlands by making sure your efforts to make your property safe don't degrade neighboring habitat.



**Pampasgrass** (*Cortaderia selloana*), an invasive plant that can increase fire risk

## Invasive plants and wildland health

Most exotic plants don't escape our yards and gardens and invade wild areas, but the handful that do can cause serious problems. **Invasive plants** are weedy exotic species that invade our native wildlands, and spread rapidly. They displace native vegetation and degrade wildlife habitat. They can also fuel wildfires, contribute to soil erosion, clog streams and rivers, and increase flooding. Because they thrive in disturbed soils, improper maintenance or over-clearance can promote their spread and lead to a landscape dominated by invasives. These plants can produce more fuels than native vegetation, increasing the potential for ignition.

When choosing plants for your fire-safe landscape, help protect the health of neighboring wildlands by **avoiding invasive species**. The California Invasive Plant Council lists the worst



offenders at [www.cal-ipc.org](http://www.cal-ipc.org). Remember when buying plants to check the scientific name to make sure you are getting the species you want!

CAL Fire graphic

## Defensible Space

Defensible space reduces the risk of losing your home to fire. This space is the area surrounding a structure where the landscape is maintained to decrease the fire hazard and provide a safety zone for firefighters defending your home. In California it should be at least 100 feet wide, but in some very high risk areas, fire agencies may

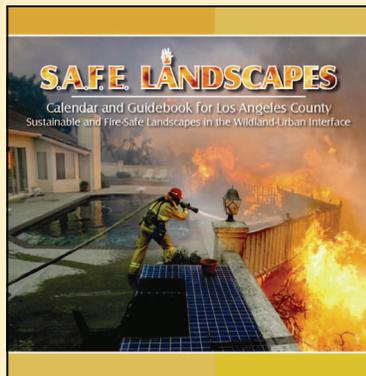
## S.A.F.E. Landscapes in the WUI

require a greater width. Check with your local fire department.

Proper maintenance for fire safety does not mean clearing all plants, but the selective removal of highly flammable vegetation. Fire-resistant vegetation should be planted in the defensible space. Landscape plants protect soil from erosion and provide aesthetic and ecological benefits. Trees and shrubs should be widely spaced so that they don't provide a continuous path for fire to climb from the ground to a tree crown or roof (a **fuel ladder**).

### Fire-safe Landscaping

Fire-safe landscapes should have horizontal and vertical separation between plants to minimize the transmission of fire from plant to plant to your home. It is important to understand, though, that there are no fire-safe plants: all plants will burn given the right conditions. Ensure plants are properly irrigated. Both under- AND over-watering can lead to unhealthy plants, and dead, flammable material. Dead leaves, branches and other flammable debris should be regularly removed. Fire-safe landscapes should also include hardscape materials that add to the fire-resistance of the landscape. Examples include brick or stone retaining walls, swimming pools, decomposed granite paths, and non-combustible deck material. These can act as a fuel break and help to slow down or change the path of an approaching fire. For information on specific materials, see the **Los Angeles County Fire Department, Forestry Division** website: <http://www.fire.lacounty.gov/Forestry/PDF/FuelModificationPlan.pdf>.



For more information on fire-safe landscaping and to download the **S.A.F.E. Landscapes 2009 Calendar and Guidebook**, go to: <http://ucanr.org/safelandscapes>.

### RESOURCES:

#### Websites

UCCE – Los Angeles: Wildland Fire & Invasive Species  
<http://ucanr.org/safelandscapes>

UC Berkeley Center for Fire Research and Outreach  
<http://firecenter.berkeley.edu>

UCCE and the County of San Diego – Wildfire Zone  
<http://www.wildfirezone.org>

Los Angeles County Fire Department, Forestry Division  
<http://www.fire.lacounty.gov/Forestry/Forestry.asp>

LA and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council  
WeedWatch Program  
<http://www.weedwatch.org/>

California Invasive Plant Council  
<http://www.cal-ipc.org>

The California Fire-Safe Council  
<http://www.firesafecouncil.org>

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection  
<http://www.fire.ca.gov>

U.S.D.A. Forest Service - Fire  
<http://www.fs.fed.us/fire>

California Chaparral Institute  
<http://www.californiachaparral.com>

#### Books

Bossard, Carla C., John M. Randall and Marc C. Hoshovsky. 2000. *Invasive Plants of California's Wildlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bornstein, Carol, David Fross, and Bart O'Brien. 2005. *California Native Plants for the Garden*. Los Olivos: Cachuma Press.

Sunset Publishing Corporation. 2007. *Western Garden Book*. Menlo Park: Sunset Publishing Corporation.

Keator, Glenn. 2007. *Designing California Native Gardens, The Plant Community Approach to Artful, Ecological Gardens*. University of California Press.

Halsey, Richard W. 2005. *Fire, Chaparral, and Survival in Southern California*. San Diego: Sunbelt Publications.

O'Brien, Bart, Betsey Landis, and Ellen Mackey. 2006. *Care and Maintenance of Southern California Native Plant Gardens*.

Smith, Nevin. 2006. *Native Treasures: Gardening With the Plants of California*. Phyllis M. Faber Books.

University of California Cooperative Extension, California Department of Water Resources, and the United States Bureau of Reclamation. 2000. *A Guide to Estimating Irrigation Water Needs of Landscape Plantings in California*. Sacramento: Department of Water Resources.

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