QUESTION: I live in a neighborhood of Santa Rosa where homes are built close to each other. How do I adapt “defensible space” for my property?

Answer: This concern is on many people’s minds right now as the chance of fires increases with heat and the drought. Defensible space is the buffer you create between a building on your property, such as your home, and the grass, trees, shrubs or any wildland area that surrounds it. For defensible space guidelines, we recommend “Preparing Your Home” from UC ANR: bit.ly/3hYucuR.

Defensible space guidelines define three fire ignition zones within 100 feet of your home. Zone 1, also called the ember zone, is the first 5 feet around your home, decks and outbuildings. Zone 2 is the next 5 to 30 feet around your home, or to the property line, and Zone 3 stretches 30 to 100 feet around your home, or to the property line. In a dense neighborhood, you may not have the 100 feet required for a defensible space; still, your highest priority should be to clean up the ember zone and complete some work in Zone 2.

The majority of homes lost during wildfires burn because of embers, not oncoming walls of flames. Embers that land on or near your house can accumulate and easily ignite items near your home, such as plants and mulch, dry leaves or stored items. Jack Cohen, a fire scientist with the U.S. Fire Service, says the it’s “little things” we can do that will protect our home, particularly within the ember zone.

How do you tackle the ember zone? Use a tape measure to mark out the 5-foot zone around your house and remove fire hazards in that space:

- Clean up corners and rain gutters where leaves and debris accumulate.

- Minimize and preferably remove plantings, especially under vents and eaves, in front of windows and sliding doors.

- Remove combustible materials such as mulches in the ember zone. Replace the mulch with inorganic materials, such as gravel or stepping stones.

- Remove firewood and other flammable items, such as cardboard boxes, old brooms and wooden furniture.

- Replace any wooden fences or gates that attach to your house with metal or noncombustible material. Embers can easily set fire to a wood fence.
■ Next, in the 5- to 30-foot zone, create plant “islands” that are separated by noncombustible pathways to interrupt the path of fire.

■ Remove dead and dry materials around or under your trees and shrubs.

■ Remove tree branches growing less than 6 feet above the ground to eliminate fuel ladders. Rediscover the beauty of your tree trunks.

■ Inspect your plants for hidden debris and prune out any dead material that can build up from the interior of shrubs.

■ Remove neglected plants that have lots of woody masses and leaf accumulation. Sometimes it’s easier to remove a plant than to keep up the necessary maintenance.

What about your neighbors? Not all people are open to the best practices for defensible space. If you start with hardening your home, keeping your 0- to 5-foot ember zone cleaned up and doing the maintenance, you will have implemented the best practices experts offer. You can then start a conversation with your neighbors, emphasizing home hardening, the ember zone and the importance of ongoing maintenance. Homeowner Associations (HOAs) and neighborhood watch groups may also be able to help.

What can you do in the garden this month and into the fall to keep it healthy? Here is a checklist of chores to focus on.

■ Keep your garden clean and tidy to keep it healthy.

■ Remove dead and decaying plant material that can attract pests that may damage healthy plants.

■ Remove older leaves on some plants, like squash vines that may naturally turn yellow and die. Remove them early to allow the plant’s energy to go into the actively growing parts.

■ Pick up fallen fruit that can introduce disease pathogens into the soil and attract rodents.

■ Pull weeds that compete with your plants for water, nutrients and sunlight.

■ Clean your garden tools after each use to avoid spreading pathogens from infected plants. Sterilize your tools with household bleach diluted 1:9 with water. Store them in a dry area to prevent rust.
■ Observe, evaluate and plan.  
Start a checklist of fall chores.

■ List plants that need to be moved, divided or replaced with more drought-tolerant plants.  
Identify plants that are not thriving because they’re in the wrong place, and plan to move them.

■ Hold off on planting anything new until the fall to take advantage of cool temperatures and fall and winter rains.

■ Check the staking on trees, supports for vines and general structural needs.

■ Evaluate your vegetable garden and make notes for spring. What worked, what didn’t? What produced well? What are your favorite varieties? Did you plant too early? Should you move something to give it more or less sunlight? Should you add compost to your garden beds?

If you’re planning a winter fall/winter garden this year, check out the Master Gardeners Vegetable Planting Summary at bit.ly/2TkMJI2 and Year-Round Food Gardening in Sonoma County at bit.ly/3ilxJll.

Contributors to this week’s column were Pat Decker, Mimi Enright, Karen Felker, Clio Tarazi and Debbie Westrick.

Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. The Master Gardeners will answer in the paper only questions selected for this column. Other questions may be directed to their Information Desk: 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.